

NATIONAL REVIEW

MY HARVARD SPEECH IN RETROSPECT

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What you need to know about over-the-counter pain medications

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The two main types of OTC pain medications are acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and they are found in 1,000s of products. **Always read the Drug Facts Label** to choose the right medication for you or your loved one, learn about dosage, make sure you don't take too much, and read other important safety information.



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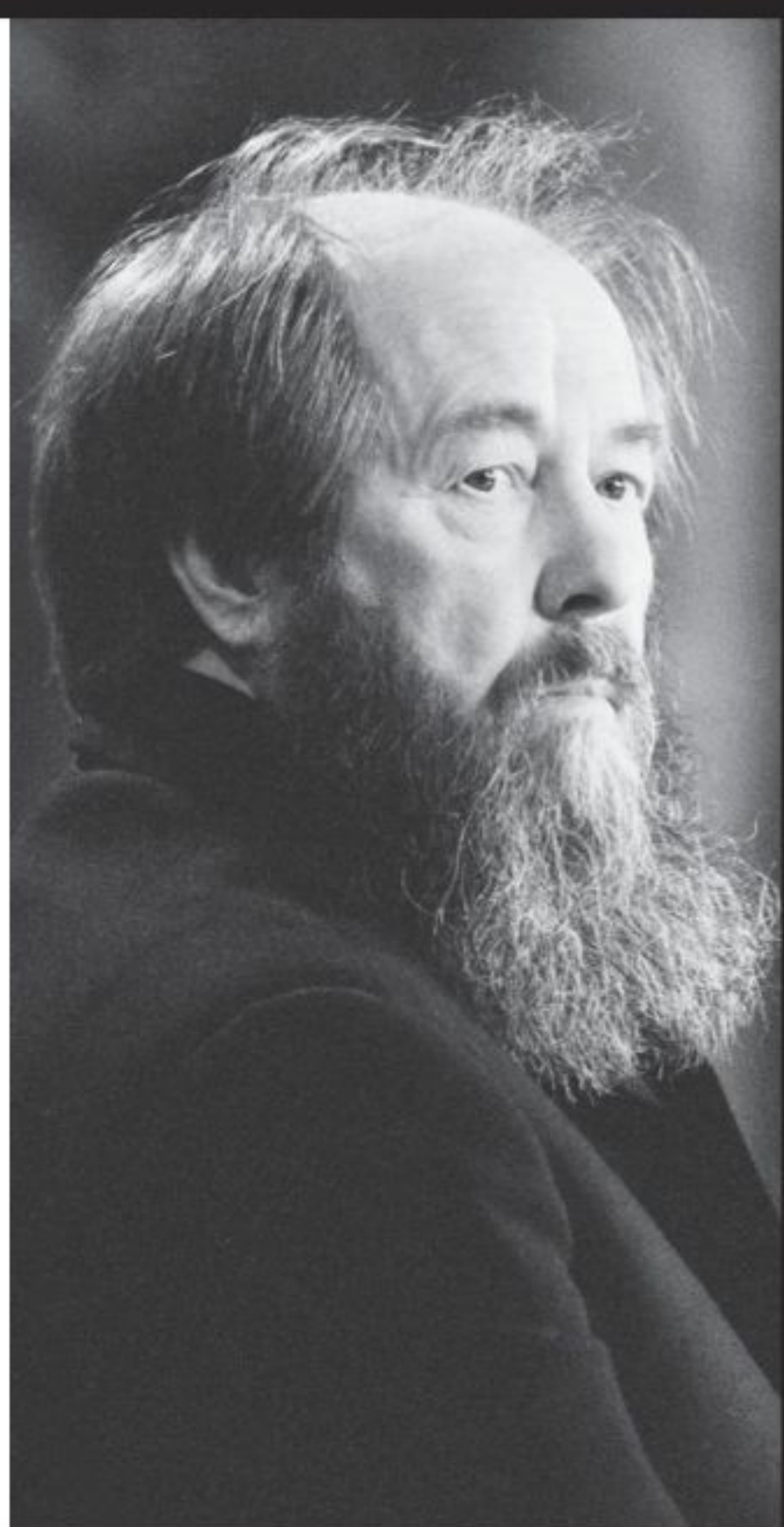


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My Harvard Speech In Retrospect

In the winter of 1978 an invitation to give a commencement speech at Harvard suddenly arrived. Of course I could have declined, as I had done in 1975, and with hundreds of other invitations. But Harvard is a place of significance, and my speech would be heard throughout America. *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*



COVER: JOHN DOWNING/GETTY IMAGES



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Our Treaty Is Our Bond

In "The Roots of Russian Aggression" (June 11), James Kirchick argues that the recent downturn in U.S.–Russian relations does not stem from "NATO enlargement, nor American foreign policy." Kirchick particularly attacks the idea that Western violations of a 1990 NATO non-expansion pledge contributed to U.S.–Russian tensions, claiming there is "no evidence of a promise not to enlarge NATO, because such a promise was never made."

I have spent ten years researching U.S. foreign policy in the late Cold War, and Kirchick's claims are incorrect.

Kirchick rightly notes that Secretary of State James Baker told Soviet leaders in 1990 that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward" if they agreed to German reunification. He is wrong, however, to claim that Baker's promise applied "solely in the context of East Germany." We know this because Baker (and other U.S. leaders) embraced a West German plan promising "NATO would not extend . . . to the area of [East Germany] nor anywhere else in Eastern Europe" before *and* during the talks with the Soviets. Moreover, the U.S. used subsequent negotiations to reinforce the impression that NATO expansion to Eastern Europe writ large was off the table. This included offering the former East Germany a "special military status" that suggested a division between NATO and the rest of Eastern Europe, and pledging to transform NATO into a "political" institution.

These points were not lost on Soviet officials. Kirchick cites a 2014 interview in which former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev said, "The topic of 'NATO expansion' was not discussed at all." He ignores, however, Gorbachev's elaboration in the same interview that expansion violated "the spirit of the statements and assurances made to us in 1990."

Ultimately, Western "statements and assurances" entailed a NATO non-expansion pledge, violations of which contributed to East–West tensions.

Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson
Brookline, Mass.

JAMES KIRCHICK RESPONDS: Mr. Shiffrinson says that I am "incorrect" in writing that the West never promised not to enlarge NATO after the end of the Cold War. While he quotes a handful of passages from U.S. diplomatic cables that seem to support his contention, he is unable to cite a single treaty, accord, or other published document in which this alleged "promise" was made. That's because it never was.

World leaders say many things to each other behind closed doors. But unless such assertions are codified in writing, they lack the force of law. "Impressions" count for little.

One prominent exception, of course, is Russia, which, like its Soviet predecessor, routinely violates the solemn agreements it has signed. That, and not the West's breaking of a nonexistent promise (or even "impression") never to enlarge NATO, is the primary reason for the deterioration in relations with Moscow.

I'll leave the last word to a prominent Russian leader, who, when asked about the Baltic states' joining NATO, replied: "Every country has the right to choose the way it ensures its security. This holds for the Baltic states as well. Secondly, and more specifically, NATO is primarily a defensive bloc. I can only repeat what I have said several times. The enlargement of the bloc is supposed to improve international security and the security of its member countries."

That was Vladimir Putin, in 2002, long before he retroactively decided that NATO enlargement was a con job thrust upon defenseless Mother Russia by a duplicitous West.

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The Week

■ Tensions are high, conflict threatens to flare up again at any moment, but let's hope the situation between the White House and the Philadelphia Eagles can be resolved peacefully.

■ Republicans continue to make progress in the polls, with oddsmakers seeing gains in the Senate and the possibility of retaining the House. They are aided by a strong economy; accomplishments that have allayed the doubts many conservatives had about President Trump; and the Democrats' continued march to the left, which in recent weeks has had them, for example, making a federal case out of the harshness of Trump's language about the violent MS-13 gang. The party in power usually loses seats in a midterm because the opposition is more fired up, and the polls continue to show high intensity among Democratic voters. But it is slowly dawning on Democratic politicians that they cannot count on the president's Twitter feed to win the election for them.

■ Bill Clinton's publicity tour for his new spy thriller, written with James Patterson, got off to a rocky start. The *Today Show*'s Craig Melvin asked the former president whether, in light of the Me Too movement, he would change anything in retrospect about his handling of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Clinton responded with barely suppressed rage, defensiveness (he "did the right thing" and "defended the Constitution"), deflection (what about Trump? should JFK have resigned?), and the suggestion that he had suffered enough and was being further victimized by Melvin's pressing the issue all these years later ("Nobody believes I got out of that for free"). When asked whether he owed Lewinsky a personal apology, he responded: "No, I do not." Twenty-four hours later, he mustered an apology of sorts for his performance in the interview, saying he had gotten "hot under the collar." He added: "I support the Me Too movement and think it is long overdue." Yes, and by at least 20 years.

■ Eric Greitens resigned less than a year and a half into his governorship of Missouri. The Republican was enmeshed in two scandals, one concerning his alleged abuse of a nonprofit group and the other a relationship with a woman that he described as an extramarital affair and she described as rape followed by blackmail. As the evidence against Greitens mounted, the Republican legislature began impeachment proceedings. A sad story, but one from which Republicans have emerged with some honor.

■ The NFL buckled on kneeling. It announced a new policy requiring players to stand for the National Anthem or stay in the locker room. Teams will be fined for infractions. The league clearly believes that it has paid a price for the kneeling controversy, augmented by the pounding it has taken from the president of the United States (another front opened up in

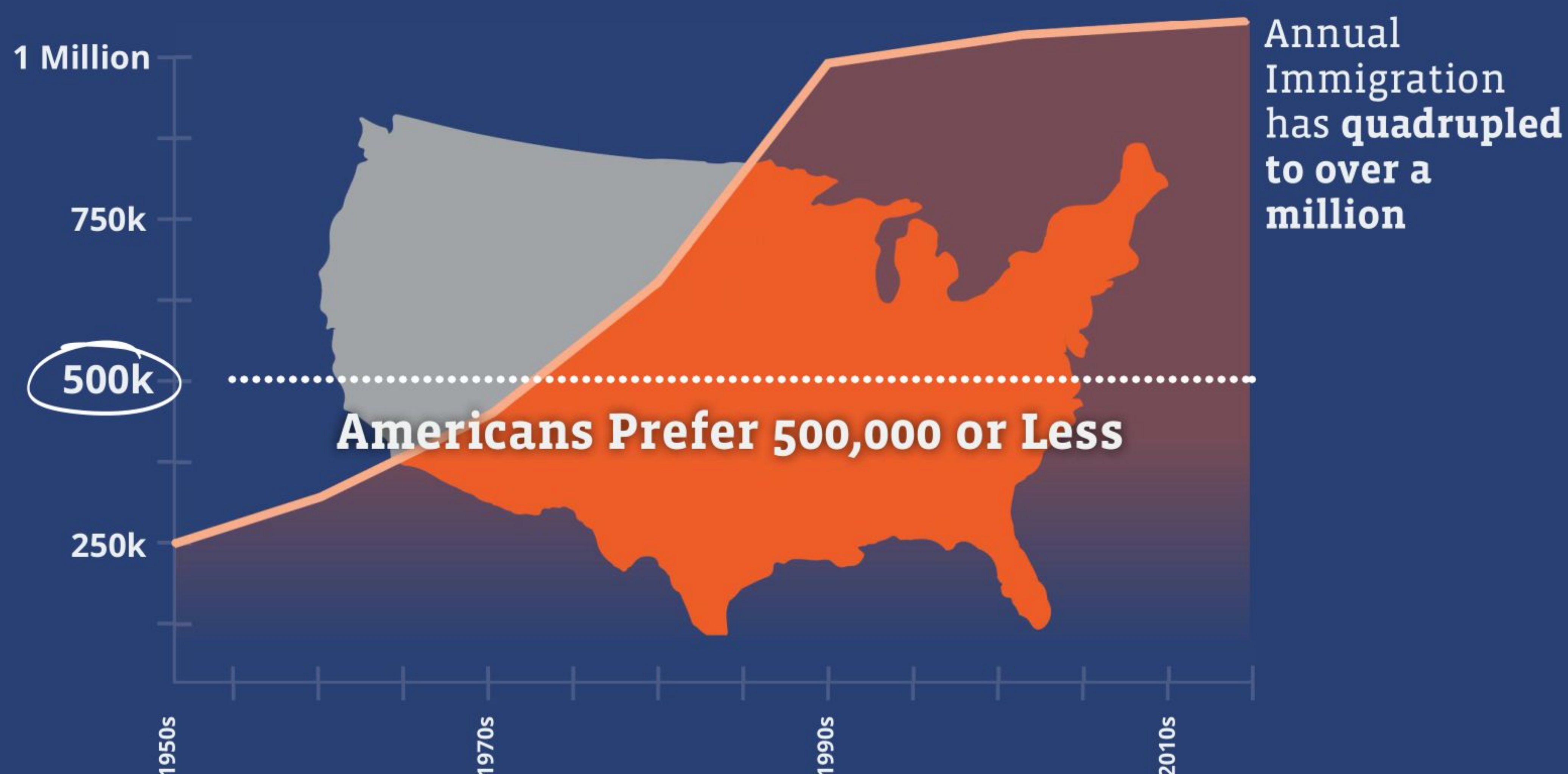
See page 8.



Trump's war with the NFL when he disinvited the Super Bowl-champion Philadelphia Eagles from a White House celebration when it became clear that Eagles players weren't going to show up). In a better world, sports wouldn't be just another venue for politico-cultural warfare in this country; in a better world, NFL players would have found a less disgraceful way to register their discontent with American policing than disrespecting our flag.

■ In the latest legal parsing of social media, a New York federal judge ruled May 23 that President Trump is constitutionally prohibited from blocking any of his followers on Twitter. Judge Naomi Reice Buchwald, determining that the president's Twitter account is a public forum as defined by the Supreme Court, declared that preventing users from seeing tweets and participating in the discussions attached to them was a violation of their First Amendment rights. Such phrases as "digital town hall" were featured in the opinion. But Twitter is not a digital town hall. It is at best, if we are allowed to continue disfiguring this metaphor, a digital private hall in which various persons, some of whom are public officials, rent rooms. A real town hall—i.e., a building—is a public forum because it is public property, just like sidewalks or parks or anyplace else from which the government cannot bar speakers simply because of their viewpoint on an issue. Twitter, however, is a private service that Trump uses just as anyone else does, and therefore he ought to be entitled to block whomever he likes (or dislikes), subject to Twitter's terms of service. Mar-a-Lago does not become a

AMERICANS WANT TO CUT IMMIGRATION. WHY IS CONGRESS IGNORING THEM?



SOURCES: Annual immigration -- DHS; polling data -- The Polling Company, April 4, 2018; more info -- www.NumbersUSA.com

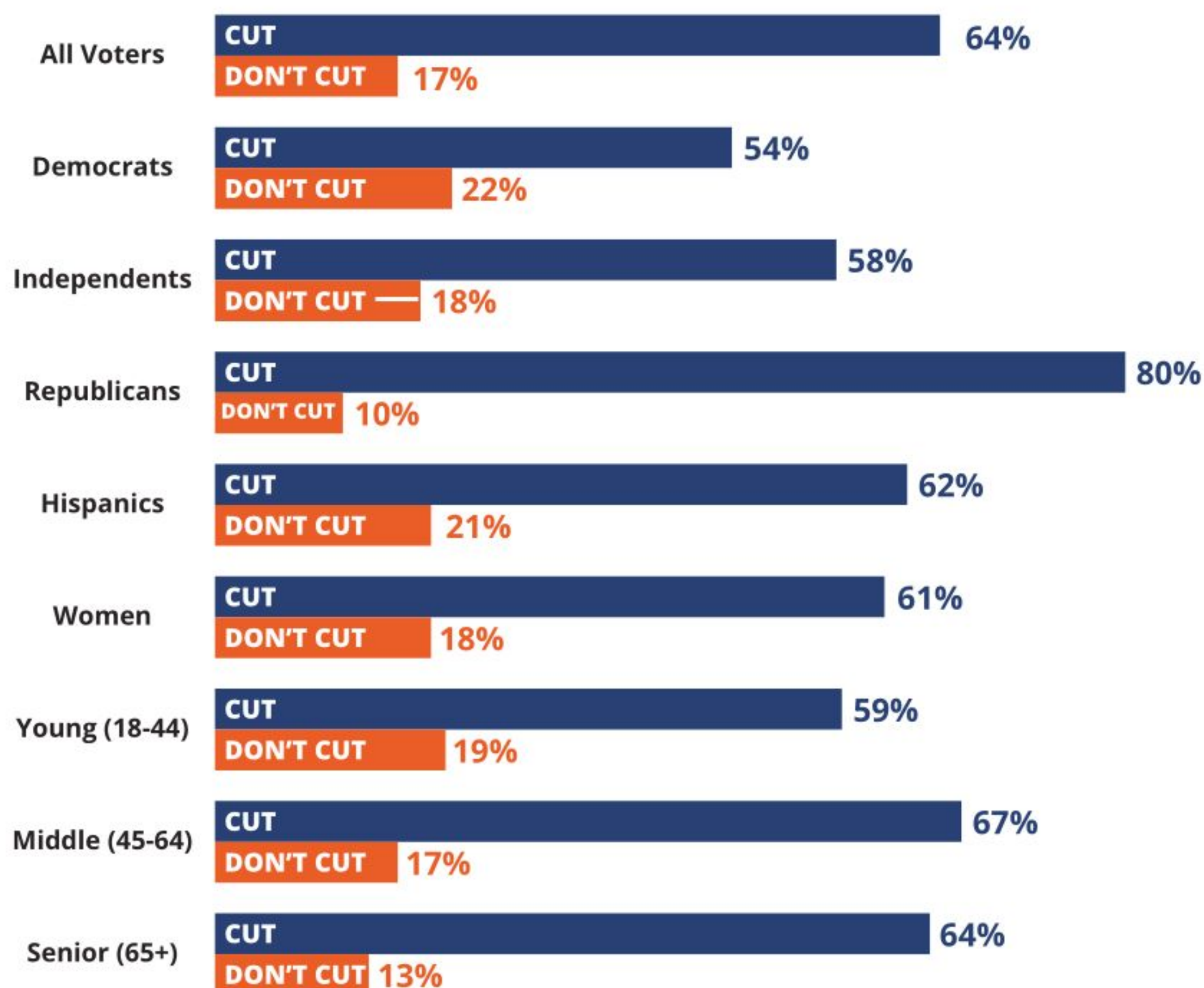
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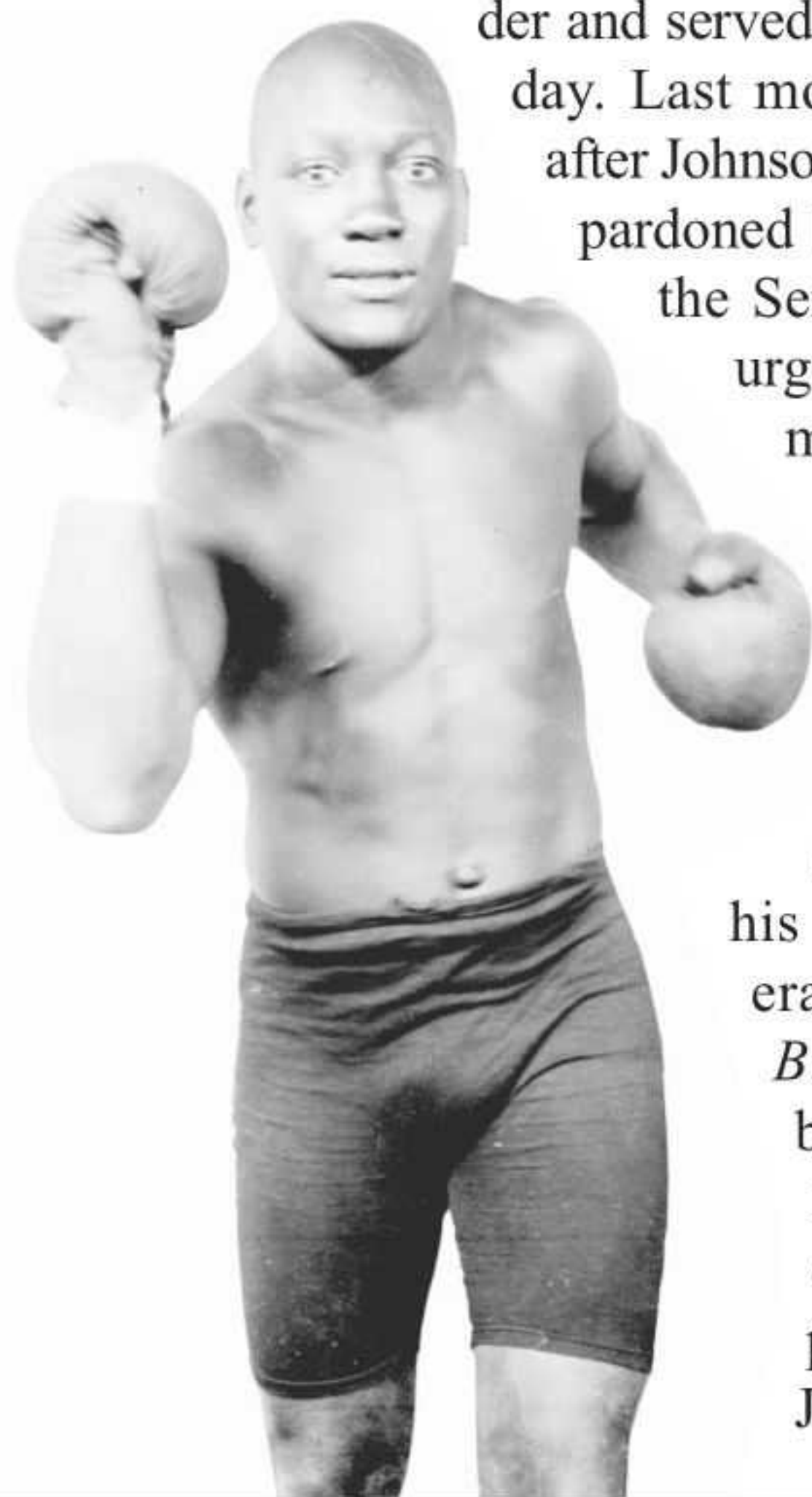
LIKELY MIDTERM VOTERS SAY THEY WANT CUTS IN IMMIGRATION NUMBERS



public forum merely because the president uses it for official business sometimes.

■ International trade is flourishing within the Trump family, as China recently approved 13 trademarks for items produced by Ivanka Trump's company, with more applications in the offing. The trademarks cover everything from chocolate to coffins (buy, and use, separately, please). Many applications for Chinese trademarks are preemptive, to prevent profiteering by local rascals. Ivanka did not herself approve the applications; she has put her company in trust (though she still profits from it). The conduct of business as usual is unseemly, however, when the beneficiary is the daughter of a president and the wife of a presidential adviser, and when her business is being done with a major economic and political rival. If the only way to avoid impropriety is selling off, so be it.

■ In 1912, Jack Johnson, the world heavyweight boxing champion, was arrested twice for violating the newly enacted Mann Act, which forbade the transport of women across state lines "for immoral purposes." The first case against Johnson collapsed after the woman, Lucille Cameron, who soon married him, refused to cooperate. A few months later, a different woman testified against him, and in 1913 he was convicted. Johnson was black. Both women were white. Johnson fled abroad with Lucille. When he returned in 1920, he surrendered to federal agents at the Mexican border and served his sentence, a year and a day.



Last month, more than 70 years after Johnson's death, President Trump pardoned him—a symbolic act that the Senate, in a resolution, had urged President Obama to make. He didn't. The Mann Act has been amended several times to remove consensual sex from its snare, in which Johnson had been caught. The glaring racial element in his prosecutions—it was an era when a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* would be a hit in the White House—has been a stain on American history. The posthumous pardon of Johnson was overdue.

■ In 2012, author and sometime NR contributor Dinesh D'Souza arranged for two small straw donations to the hopeless New York senatorial campaign of Wendy Long, an old friend of his. Such actions, clearly illegal, are typically punished by fines. The feds instead threw the book at him, resulting in a fine, five years' probation, and eight months in a halfway house. Alan Dershowitz commented that the legal full-court press "smack[ed] of selective prosecution." President Trump has now granted D'Souza a pardon. Next up should be reform of the campaign-finance laws.

■ The 2010 Dodd-Frank law was an attempt to prevent future recessions through the power of regulation. Thus far, all it's accomplished has been to make it difficult for small banks to compete with the industry's giants, which can much more easily absorb the costs of compliance. President Trump, however, recently signed a bill rolling back some of the least popular provisions. The new law makes it easier for community banks and credit unions to offer mortgages outside the onerous "qualified mortgage" rule (so long as the institutions keep the mortgages rather than selling them), raises the threshold at which banks are subject to "stress tests" from \$50 billion in assets to \$250 billion, and exempts small banks from numerous other arcane provisions as well, including reporting requirements and restrictions on "speculative" trades. We'd have preferred a broader repeal of the 2010 law, but a significant rollback—targeting community institutions that did little to contribute to the financial crisis a decade ago yet were disproportionately harmed by the Democrats' "reform"—is a legislative accomplishment for a Congress in need of them.

■ Republicans on the House Ways and Means Committee have put forward a gut renovation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the cash-welfare program famously overhauled in 1996. Since that year, serious problems have emerged: Some states have turned TANF's block grants into a slush fund (paying for college scholarships, among other things), and others have escaped having to enforce the work requirements (through various credits the law provides). The new reform would crack down on the misuse of federal funds, in addition to requiring states to engage all recipients in work activities. These are positive developments, but there are three risks as well: First, states would no longer be held accountable based on how many recipients actually met the work requirements; second, the definition of a work activity would be expanded, with states even able to create their own; and third, as an alternative way of holding states accountable, the program aims to track welfare recipients' employment *after* leaving the program, a process sure to prove difficult. There's no denying our welfare system is still deeply flawed, but Republicans must be careful not to lose the gains they made two decades ago.

■ The new Trump "zero tolerance" enforcement policy at the border has—par for the course—met with a hysterical response. The administration is now prosecuting all adult migrants for illegal border crossing and holding them while their asylum claims are adjudicated. If the adults brought their children with them, this necessitates their separation. Obviously, this is a significant moral downside. But Congress could alleviate the situation immediately by allocating more resources to detention space—especially family detention space—and giving the administration the legal authority to continue holding kids while their parents pursue asylum (an old consent decree makes it impossible to hold kids for longer than roughly 20 days, even if their parents are still detained). As it is, we have to choose between waving all Central American migrants with kids into the country, probably never to be seen by authorities again, or enforcing our laws. A functional and humane system would not impose this choice.

■ Soon after President Trump directed the Department of Energy to find a way to keep struggling coal and nuclear power plants alive, the DOE's as-yet-unfinished plan to fulfill that directive leaked to reporters. The plan, justified under a national-security provision of the Federal Power Act and the Korean War-era Defense Production Act, would force energy-grid operators to buy power from these plants. Were this proposal to become federal policy, the Trump administration would be tipping the scales of the American energy sector under the highly dubious justification that the continued existence of these power plants is vital to national security. As a general matter, corporate welfare is distasteful; worse is the administration's penchant for doling it out with fictive "national security" justifications. Reportedly, the administration is divided over the plan. May its opponents prevail.

■ President Trump has signed three executive orders aiming to make the civil service more accountable and curtail unions' use of public resources. The orders make it easier to fire poor performers, require agencies to negotiate contracts quickly, bar federal employees from spending more than a quarter of their workday on "official time" (during which taxpayers pay them to do union business), and end the practice of letting unions use space in federal buildings for free. As commonsensical as these changes are, however, steps taken by executive order can be undone just as easily. Trump made a good move; Congress should write it into the law.

■ Across the country, conservative state legislatures have been striving to implement more stringent protections for the unborn—and in a few instances, they've achieved some success. This year's biggest victory came after the Supreme Court declined to hear a challenge to an Arkansas bill prohibiting prescription of abortifacients unless the relevant physician has admitting privileges at a local hospital, effectively limiting most early-term abortions in the state. Meanwhile, both Mississippi and Louisiana have enacted bans on abortion after the 15th week of pregnancy; Louisiana's was signed by a Democratic governor. A few states have prohibited selective abortions based on gender, race, or disability, and Iowa governor Kim Reynolds recently signed the nation's most pro-life law, prohibiting abortions after a fetal heartbeat can be detected, usually about six weeks into pregnancy. While several of these regulations have faced successful legal challenge or been stymied in court, the overall strategy seems to be working: Incrementally, states are finding legal chinks in the abortion-on-demand regime.

■ One month after the death of Alfie Evans, Bambino Gesù Pediatric Hospital in Rome released the "Charter of Rights of the Incurable Child." Its ten articles include the proposition that every family should have the right to choose their child's doctors and hospital, even if it means a "move to a country other than their own." Alfie's parents, like those of Charlie Gard last year, were prevented by British courts from transferring their severely ailing child to Bambino Gesù, which in both cases had offered to treat the infant after his doctors recommended removal of life support and obstructed the parents' decision in favor of the second opinion they had sought. Mariella Enoc, the president of Bambino Gesù, says that the hospital

will send the charter to the European Parliament and member states of the European Union. In the United Kingdom, Charlie's parents have begun a campaign to revise the relevant laws and regulations there. No one expects Bambino Gesù to meet with quick and easy acceptance of its proposals, but Godspeed to the pediatricians there as they continue to affirm that even the incurable have a right to fight for as much time as they can.

■ We'd prefer if the on-again, off-again Trump–Kim summit were off-again. It is assured to be compelling theater but less likely to serve U.S. interests. If the past is any guide, the North will use some sort of promise of denuclearization to relax the international pressure against it. Even if Trump doesn't want to ease up, it will be hard to resist South Korean entreaties to loosen the sanctions regime based on positive atmospherics around the historic meeting. And the Chinese will exploit any cracks in the sanctions. The North Korean regime has perfected this gambit over the decades, which is why it now has nuclear weapons to promise to get rid of.

■ Some 2,000 clerics in Afghanistan were meeting in Kabul. They are members of the Afghan Ulema Council. They issued a fatwa against suicide bombing—saying that it was forbidden, "haram," under Islamic law. They also called on militants to enter peace negotiations with the government. "The ongoing war in Afghanistan is illegal and has no root in sharia law," they said. The war "does nothing but shed the blood of Muslims." Less than an hour after they made this statement, they were suicide-bombed. At least seven were killed and at least 20 wounded. Once again, we see that prominent among the Islamic State's victims are pious Muslims.

■ A French magazine, *Le Point*, put Turkey's strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan on its cover, saying, "The Dictator: How Far Will Erdogan Go?" Copies of the magazine duly appeared at kiosks, along with posters promoting the cover. Some Turks in France took offense at this. At one kiosk, near Avignon, they pressured workers to take the poster down. The workers complied. This moment was caught on video, and was seen around France. *Le Point* requested that its poster be returned, and it was. Police then surveilled the kiosk. France's president, Emmanuel Macron, took to Twitter, saying, "It is totally unacceptable for @LePoint's posters to be removed from kiosks, just because they displease the enemies of freedom, whether in France or abroad. Freedom of the press is priceless. Without it, there is dictatorship." In Turkey, the dictatorship was mightily displeased with France. *Chapeau*, Macron.

■ Arkady Babchenko is a Russian journalist, one of the bravest. As a young man, he joined the army, fighting the Chechen wars. Then he became an investigative journalist, reporting stories that annoyed the Kremlin. This made him a marked man, and he fled Russia for his life last year. On May 29 of this year, it was reported that Babchenko had been murdered in Kiev. Tributes to him poured in. He got to read his obituaries. The next day, Ukrainian intelligence revealed that it had faked Babchenko's death to unravel murder plots against him and others. Opinion on this gambit was split. Some said that the Ukrainians had undermined trust in government; others were

thrilled, saying that at last someone had put one over on the FSB (as the KGB is now called). Garry Kasparov was in the latter camp, writing, “I have lost too many friends to bullets and beatings to spend my anger on anyone other than the assassins and the man in Moscow who commands them.”

■ The stories ran like prairie fires through pop-land, and by now everyone not a Trappist has seen the flames or smelled the smoke. Roseanne Barr had the successful reboot of her sitcom canceled thanks to a late-night tweet in which she speculated that former Obama aide Valerie Jarrett was descended from Planet of the Apes. Soon thereafter TV comic Samantha Bee had to apologize for bestowing the worst four-letter insult to women on Ivanka Trump. Barr is a Trump supporter; is that why her head rolled, while Bee’s, and the heads of the writers and producers who came up with her epithet and approved it for broadcast, remain in place? Whatever the explanation, no one seemed to care about Barr’s loose-lipped talk when she was merely a 9/11 truther. Meanwhile we are stuck with a conjunction of insult as humor and instant dissemination, which no phony apologies, nor the firing of any number of stars, will dispel.



■ MSNBC’s Joy Reid simply can’t keep her story straight. When, earlier in the year, a set of homophobic posts was discovered on Reid’s old blog, she apologized and said she’d evolved. But when a second set, identical in tone, was discovered later, she said that she’d been retroactively hacked and that the FBI was looking into the case. Now that a bunch more posts have been discovered—they include 9/11 conspiracy theories, the casting of immigration as a libertarian plot, a photoshop of John McCain as a school shooter, and some casual anti-Semitism—the hacking line has disappeared in favor of another apology. One almost gets the feeling that she’s making it up as she goes along. She was a poisonous troll back then, as she is now, though her views have changed; perhaps MSNBC wants to be in that business. That she cannot keep her story straight should be fatal for her career.

ing line has disappeared in favor of another apology. One almost gets the feeling that she’s making it up as she goes along. She was a poisonous troll back then, as she is now, though her views have changed; perhaps MSNBC wants to be in that business. That she cannot keep her story straight should be fatal for her career.

■ In the 1960s, civil-rights activists sat down in restaurants and tried to get served. Now they try to get thrown out. In Portland, Ore., Lillian Green, a state education bureaucrat whose job involves “building capacity for equity work,” showed up at the Back to Eden vegan bakery after closing time and demanded to be served. The staff politely refused; Green, who is black, filmed the ensuing argument; and suddenly the bakery (which is woke even by Portland standards, complaining on Facebook that it does business in a “gentrified neighborhood in a racist city within a racist state of a racist country”) was worse than Alabama in 1955—maybe even worse than Starbucks. The manager issued a self-flagellating apology, fired two employees, and announced a “reparations happy hour” at which every black customer would receive \$10 and a free drink. He invited Green to meet with him to arrange further groveling, whereupon Facebook commentators

complained that he had not offered to pay her for doing so. First time as tragedy, second time as farce, and 17th time as dreary, counterproductive ritual.

■ NR contributor James Kirchick, Yale class of ’06, has announced his candidacy for alumni fellow of the Yale Corporation. He needs 4,226 signatures by October 1 to be listed on the ballot that goes out to alums. Kirchick’s two main issues—administrative bloat and free speech—are interrelated. Like most modern universities, Yale carries ranks of diversity cheerleaders on its payroll. These encouraged the protesters who in 2015 raged at Silliman College master Nicholas Christakis after his wife suggested that the university leave students to make their own decisions about what Halloween costumes to wear (the horror!). Yale’s 1975 Woodward Report on free expression was a clarion call for open and honest discussion and debate; Yale today relapses into the safe-space swamp. Kirchick, a sprightly libertarian, is just the candidate to call his alma mater back to its best traditions.

■ British actor Benedict Cumberbatch, the star of the TV series *Sherlock*, a modern take on the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle character, was riding in an Uber in London with his wife last November, when he spotted four thugs beating up a delivery rider and attempting to steal the man’s bicycle. Cumberbatch asked his driver to pull over, got out of the car, and with the help of the driver fended off the attackers, who fled. The story came out in June, as told by the driver to the *Sun*: “It all got a bit surreal. Here was Sherlock Holmes fighting off four attackers just ’round the corner from Baker Street.” He added: “The cyclist was lucky, Benedict’s a superhero.” Reached for comment, Cumberbatch was more understated: “I did it out of, well, I had to, you know.” Well done.



■ In Paris last month, a four-year-old boy fell from the balcony of his family’s sixth-floor apartment. On his way down, he grabbed hold of the railing on the balcony of the apartment two floors below. From the street, a bystander, Mamadou Gassama, rushed to the building and proceeded to scale it, climbing straight up, from the railing of one balcony to that of the next. He got to the fourth floor in less than a minute. In one fell swoop, he lifted himself up, planted one foot on the balcony floor, lifted the boy up, and planted him safely beside him. His sheer athleticism was astonishing; his courage, more so. The crowd that had gathered below roared their amazement. Camera video of Gassama’s feat soon went viral. Emmanuel Macron invited him to the Élysée Palace, where he presented the 22-year-old Malian immigrant with a medal for valor and promised to grant him citizenship and a job with the Paris fire department. Gassama had been in the country illegally, but French officials acted appropriately, making an exception for an exceptional case, the Spider-Man of the 18th Arrondissement.

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■ John Smoltz was one of the greatest pitchers of his generation. Indeed, he is one of the best pitchers ever, as his name litters the record book. He is also a golfer—and he has just played his way into the U.S. Senior Open. That is, he earned a qualifying spot, in grueling competition. What can we say? When you got it, you got it—at least a dazzling few do.

■ A popular book of the 1980s was called “Real Men Don’t Eat Quiche.” Today’s U.S. armed forces beg to differ. Pentagon foodies have developed a variety of new rations that use innovative technologies to attack the age-old problem of combining portability, durability, and nutrition without sacrificing too much edibility. A new method of drying fruit, for example, decreases size and weight by 50 percent while “still leaving a little moisture in it to maintain some of the original flavor and texture,” an Army journalist excitedly reports. Other items developed to endure punishing field conditions include not only backpack-stable spinach quiche but a “Korean barbeque stir-fry packet,” pepperoni pizza (made with “high-heat-tolerant mozzarella” to yield a three-year shelf life), and the irresistible-sounding “chocolate Performance Readiness Bar.” All these items are “designed to increase infantry squad lethality.” Based on these descriptions, we suspect they may increase infantry squad profanity as well.

■ Philip Roth commanded the best American prose of his generation. Tom Wolfe’s flashed, John Updike’s glittered; Roth’s was smooth, muscular, precise, and, when need be, funny as hell. He made a brilliant start with stories long (“Goodbye, Columbus”) and short (“Defender of the Faith”), realistically observing post-war American Jewish life. Then came *Portnoy’s Complaint*, his obscene succès de scandale, a book-length stand-up monologue. The combination of barely concealed autobiography and sexual exhibitionism unfortunately took him down many dead ends, but in the last lap of his career he recovered himself with a panoramic social novel, *American Pastoral*. Could he have done more? Impossible. Better? Perhaps. He never got the Nobel Prize, but he wrote strong, true words, which is the lasting writerly accomplishment. Dead at 85, R.I.P.

THE WHITE HOUSE

What Trump’s Lawyers Get Right

IN early June, the *New York Times* published a long letter from President Trump’s legal team to Special Counsel Robert Mueller arguing that he should drop his request to interview the president. The letter makes many factual and legal assertions, some of which are highly debatable. Yet, assuming that it accurately reflects the nature and scope of Mueller’s investigation, two of its bottom-line claims have merit: The special counsel does not have a viable criminal case against the president, nor has he justified the extraordinary measure of seeking the president’s testimony.

The letter suggests that the special counsel’s inquiry into Trump’s conduct is focused on obstruction. Mueller was appointed on May 17, 2017, amid the uproar over two events: Trump’s firing of then-FBI director James Comey, and Comey’s subsequent leak of a memo-to-self that claimed that

Trump had pressured him to drop any investigation of former national-security adviser Michael Flynn. The letter implies that these two events remain the gravamen of the special counsel’s obstruction probe. If that is so, there is no obstruction case.

Only *illegal* acts to influence an investigation can predicate a criminal charge of obstruction against a president. Investigation and prosecution are executive functions in our system. Consequently, a prosecutor may not charge obstruction based on the president’s exercise of his constitutional prerogatives. The president’s authority to remove executive officials such as the FBI director and to exercise prosecutorial discretion—an executive power—by weighing in on the merits of an investigation are incontestable.

Theoretically, if a president attempted to impede an investigation by illegal acts, that could predicate an obstruction charge. Presidents Nixon and Clinton, for example, were properly investigated on obstruction allegations based on witness tampering and subornation of perjury. But those presidents were subjected to *impeachment* proceedings, the remedy our system contemplates for egregious executive misconduct.

The president’s attorneys are also correct in asserting that no federal prosecutor should seek a president’s testimony, much less attempt to compel it by grand-jury subpoena, absent a demonstration “with specificity” that the information sought is “important” to proving a serious crime and “is not practically available from another source” (to quote a D.C. Circuit opinion cited by the attorneys). It is doubtful that Mueller can establish either condition.

There was no evident obstruction, and Mueller cannot legitimately claim that the information he wants from Trump is unavailable from any other source. He has collected voluminous documentary evidence and extensively questioned other participants in Comey’s termination and Flynn’s investigation. The prosecutor does not need the president’s testimony to prove what happened. Nor does he need it to establish Trump’s state of mind. Unless Trump committed an illegal act, his intentions are irrelevant.

In short, unless there is a smoking gun against the president that is lurking unseen even in the private jousting between Trump’s team and Mueller, the special prosecutor should be wrapping up the obstruction aspect of his probe rather than extending it via a court fight over the president’s testimony.

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Most congressional Republicans think the tariffs, by hurting their constituents, will also hurt their reelection prospects. They would like to campaign on today's strong economy and the tax and regulatory policies that have helped to bring it about. The president's new trade taxes counteract those policies.

On trade as on other matters, Congress has over the years given the executive branch too much authority that is too prone to abuse. In other areas, the president and his appointees have been effective foes of the arbitrary and capricious executive power—the unaccountable “administrative state”—that has thereby been unleashed. When it comes to trade, they have decided instead to illustrate the dangers.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The Masterpiece Cakeshop Decision

THE goal of a Supreme Court litigant is first and foremost to win his case. And that's exactly what Jack Phillips did—by a shockingly wide margin. In a 7–2 decision, the Court held that the State of Colorado violated Phillips's right to free exercise of religion by ruling that he violated the state's public-accommodation law when he refused to bake a custom cake for a same-sex wedding.

When Phillips first filed his appeal, predictions of such a resounding victory were few and far between, and the media immediately set about minimizing the ruling's significance. The *New York Times* said that the majority “relied on narrow grounds.” CNN legal analyst Steve Vladeck called the decision “remarkably narrow.” NPR's Nina Totenberg wrote a story headlined “In Narrow Decision, Supreme Court Decides in Favor of Baker over Same-Sex Couple.”

There's no doubt that the Court could have issued a broader ruling, one holding that baking a custom wedding cake is protected expression under the free-speech clause of the First Amendment. Its actual ruling is nonetheless significant. It might increase the cost of state discrimination against traditional religious beliefs.

The Court ruled that the State of Colorado violated Jack Phillips's free-exercise rights in two specific ways. First, it singled out examples of obvious religious animus in a transcript to show that Phillips did not receive a fair hearing from

the Colorado Civil Rights Commission. Most egregiously, one commissioner had compared Phillips's principled refusal to custom-design a cake for a gay wedding to religious arguments for slavery or the Holocaust.

While the Court could have ruled against Colorado based solely on the commissioners' expressed anti-religious animus, it went farther. Justice Kennedy also noted the existence of a rather profound double standard. It turns out that even as Colorado punished Jack Phillips for refusing to design a cake for a gay wedding, it had protected the right of bakers to refuse to create cakes with anti-gay messages. In other words, the existence of favoritism was itself evidence of anti-religious animus.

There are underlying free-speech issues that remain unresolved, but until then the Court has issued a ruling that urges tolerance—for people of faith. To a commissioner's description of Phillips's religious-liberty claim as a “despicable piece of rhetoric,” Justice Kennedy—the judicial father of gay marriage—responded with words that should echo in the public debate:

To describe a man's faith as “one of the most despicable pieces of rhetoric that people can use” is to disparage his religion in at least two distinct ways: by describing it as despicable, and also by characterizing it as merely rhetorical—something insubstantial and even insincere.

Yet is that not exactly what critics of orthodox religious believers do every day? While there is little doubt that radical academics and pundits will continue to act with actual malice, their counterparts in the state and local governments will now find that their hostility and double standards carry a cost. On that basis alone, Phillips's victory is worth celebrating.



Baker Jack Phillips

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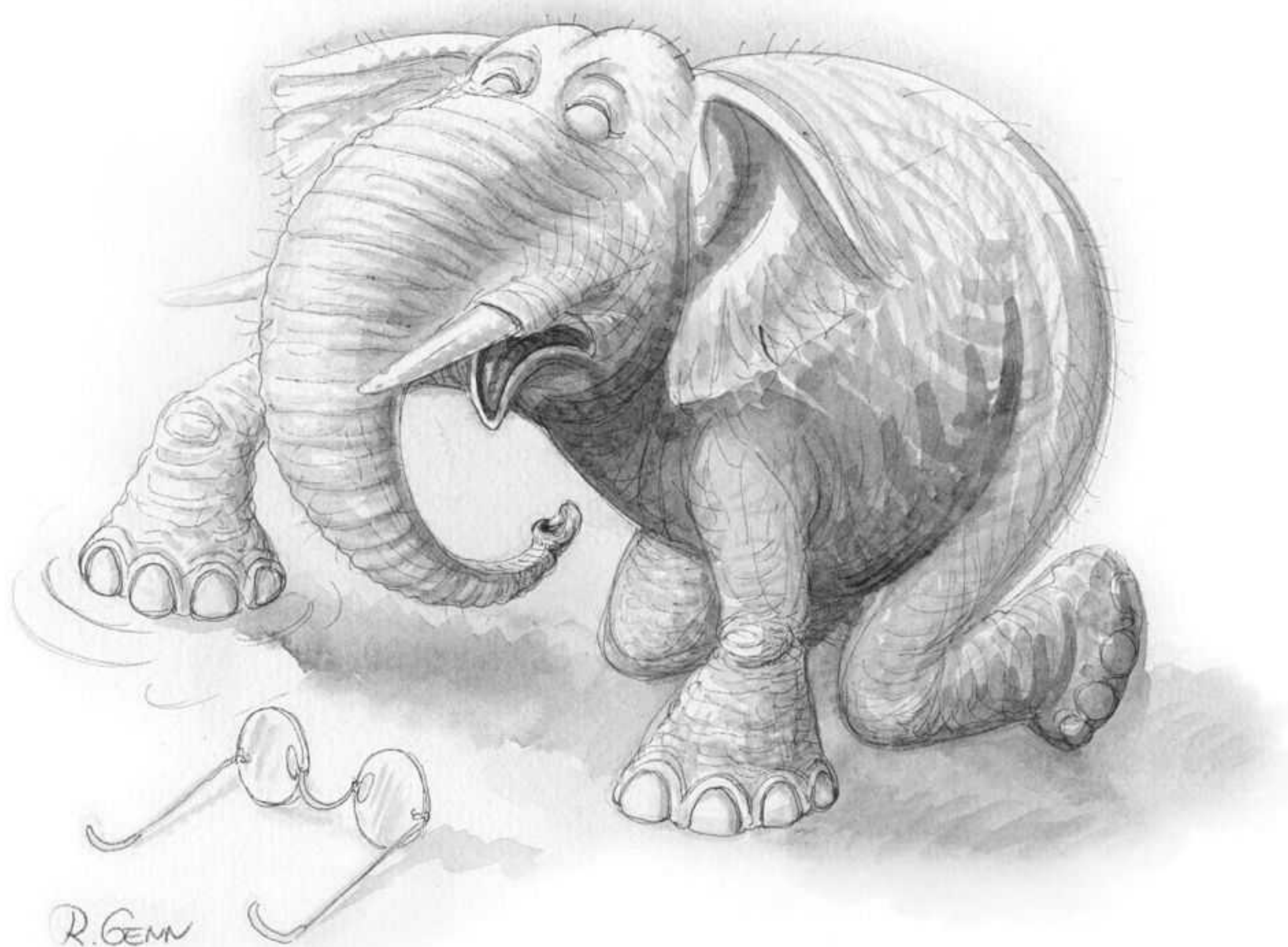
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Right to Where?

Conservatives need an agenda

BY RAMESH PONNURU

It sometimes seems as though the true goal of Donald Trump's presidency is to make him the center of every conversation. If so, it must be said that the president has to a quite remarkable degree succeeded in yet another far-fetched ambition. The trend may be particularly pronounced among conservatives who think about politics for a living. For them, how to think about Trump is topics one, two, and three, and it lurks behind four, five, and six as well.

The debates about Trump are important ones, and there is no reason they should not proceed. Anyone who believes that Trump poses a major threat to the rule of law or that his opponents might well pull off a kind of coup against him—and some serious and intelligent people believe each of these things—will naturally be inclined to put off other political questions as beside the point. Someone who thinks one of these things might well conclude that to dwell on other issues is to shirk from duty in a moment of national crisis.

But conservatives need to have another conversation, one that is not about Trump but about what we want out of politics. What is our agenda? How do we want to change government policy? Neither Trump's most ardent fans nor the most

committed Never Trumpers have been saying much to answer these questions.

Last year, Republicans began their first period of control of the House, Senate, and presidency since 2006. After only eleven months, they largely gave up using that power to try to accomplish anything legislatively. The Senate is confirming judges, and the executive branch continues to make regulatory changes, but Republicans aren't doing much more than that. Nor are congressional Republicans campaigning on their plans for a productive 2019 if voters extend their control over the government this fall.

Congressional Republicans and the Trump administration are not always in sync. Most of the representatives dislike Trump's tweets and his tariffs. Republicans in Trump's circle have sometimes suggested, at least off the record, that they would be better off with a Democratic House. But there is no real division between the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue on the legislative agenda. Congress is not doing much, and Trump is not pressing it to do more. Conservatives who aren't in government have, for the most part, been too busy celebrating or condemning Trump to notice the hole where an agenda should be, or to try to fill it.

In the absence of a policy agenda, Republicans seem increasingly inclined to rely on cultural controversies to win votes. To the extent we let arguments over football players and the flag become the sum and substance of our politics—even when our arguments are right—we practically resign ourselves to the government we have. Beneath the anger is complacency.

This problem has been developing for some time. For many years, conservatives could get by with an old agenda inherited from Ronald Reagan. That agenda, partly because of its success, over time became outdated. It also became a poorer fit for a party that increasingly appealed to working-class rather than professional-class whites. During the 2016 primaries, Donald Trump triumphed in part because he recognized the irrelevance of the old agenda. But he was unable or unwilling to supply a new one of his own that fleshed out his instincts and themes.

Even on immigration, his signature issue, he went back and forth during the course of the campaign on how to handle illegal immigrants who are already here, and he did not state a position on legal-immigration levels until several months into his presidency. By now, even his biggest critics must admit that he has enormous political talents, and even his biggest fans must admit that those talents do not include policy development.

This is not an entirely bad thing. The idea that the president should set the policy agenda is not in the Constitution, was not the American practice for much of our history, and was introduced into our politics by progressives in order to promote their vision of government. One of the things conservatives need to do in our era is rebuild our system's capacity to govern without that type of presidential leadership.

We have to start by identifying the changes in government that we want to see. Only after conservatives have an agenda can politicians decide which items on it they wish to advance, when, and how. Only once we have goals can we make intelligent compromises based on achieving them.

My own list of what conservatives should seek would begin with four areas where government policy is badly in need of reform.

The first is health care. Republican politicians may wish for Obamacare to

be behind them as an issue, but reality is not going to oblige. It remains the case that premiums are rising—to some extent because of Obamacare, to some extent because of the changes that Republicans have made to Obamacare. It remains the case that Obamacare has left many people with policies that are expensive and cover routine care but include very high deductibles that leave them exposed to large costs if they develop serious medical conditions, which is roughly the opposite of what insurance ought to do.

Liberals and Democrats have their answers to the public's dissatisfactions with health care, answers all of which essentially move toward a more government-centric system. If as conservatives and Republicans we confine ourselves to critiquing those plans, we will inevitably cede momentum to them. We need our own solutions.

Those solutions should aim, above all, to create a market in which nearly everyone can buy at least a cheap, renewable policy that protects him against catastrophic costs—and can buy more than that if he is willing and able to spend more. Deregulation will be needed to accomplish this goal. If insurers want to offer people cheap, renewable policies that protect them from catastrophic medical expenses, and people want to buy those policies, the federal government should not stand between them. Given the state of health-care politics, the key first step in moving toward such a market is to devolve power from the federal government to the states. Washington has shown that it cannot make health-insurance markets better. We ought to let the states try different approaches.

Second, conservatives ought to take on the higher-education cartel. Tuitions have kept rising, and dropout rates are unacceptably high. Many people are graduating without the skills needed to take jobs that require college degrees. Many people are not graduating at all: The incomes of people who go to college but don't finish are only slightly higher than the incomes of people who don't go at all—the big difference being that many of the first group also have college-loan debt to pay off.

In short, a system that is supposed to be a ladder for upward mobility has become to a significant degree a bottleneck in it. In reforming this system, we should open up multiple fronts. We should create new

options for financing college, such as income-share agreements. We should create new options for accrediting institutions of higher education so that more experimentation is allowed. We should expand online-learning options. We should require colleges whose students have high levels of loan default to pick up a share of the tab. We should make it possible for prospective students and their parents to know how graduates of different colleges, and of different departments within those colleges, fare in the job market. And we should clear the way for professional certificates, apprenticeships, and other paths to gaining skills for well-paid employment that do not require a college degree.

Third, we need to bring federal spending under control. If we are serious about that goal, there is no alternative to tackling the growth of the entitlement programs, especially Social Security and Medicare. The president has said he opposes cuts in these programs. But we do not need to cut benefits to make them solvent; we need only restrain their growth.

Social Security has two main functions: It's a paternalistic forced-savings program, and it's a redistributive program. Both are designed to keep people from being destitute in old age. It has been successful in reducing elderly poverty. But it has not ended elderly poverty even as it spends and taxes much more than needed to achieve that goal. And it has suppressed savings, reduced the country's capital stock, and thereby reduced economic growth.

We should move toward a more rational system that guarantees against poverty—by setting a minimum benefit at or higher than the poverty level. At the same time, we should change the way benefits are calculated. As it stands, the program is designed so that the person in the middle of the income distribution who retires this year gets a bigger check than the person in the middle of the income distribution who retired in 1998. And the middle-income person who will retire in 2038 is scheduled to get a higher benefit still, even after adjusting for inflation.

If we changed the program so that average benefit levels rose to keep up with inflation but no faster than that, we would solve 94 percent of the program's solvency problem over the next 75 years. At the very least, we should hold benefit growth to inflation for people with high lifetime

earnings. They can, after all, afford to save more for their own retirements.

Medicare should be reformed in accordance with the same principles. A safety net should be maintained; those with high lifetime earnings should have to pay for a higher share of their health costs in retirement; and changes should be implemented gradually so as give tomorrow's retirees time to adjust to them.

Fourth, we need immigration reform. Around 40 percent of illegal immigrants to our country came here legally but overstayed their visas. A wall, whatever its merits, would not address this problem. If we want to instill respect for the law and have control over whom we let in, we have to make employers verify the legal status of new hires—and give them the tools to do so. Once we have established that Washington has the political will to enforce the immigration laws, we can turn to debating whether to grant legal status to illegal immigrants who have been here a long time, formed community ties, and avoided further trouble with the law. If we don't prove that the law will be enforced going forward, then providing legal status will be an invitation for more illegal immigration followed by yet another amnesty. We should end that cycle.

Legal immigration needs to be reformed, too. It should be oriented more toward the recruitment of high-skilled immigrants and less toward the reunification of extended families. We don't have a national interest in low-skilled immigration on the scale we have allowed it, and low-skilled immigration puts unnecessary pressure on people at the low end of the labor market. The price is paid by many low-skilled immigrants themselves. But if immigrants do not succeed in America, we all pay a price. The precise numbers can be negotiated, but our direction ought to be clear.

These ideas are very far from a complete agenda, and some of them might well make politicians blanch. Doubtless there are many other ideas that conservatives can and should pursue. There is much more to do. But that's the point: There is much more to do. The conservative themes of decentralization, local control, markets, accountability, national self-confidence: If they are not to be lifeless abstractions, they must be put into practice and shown to work. Wherever they stand on Trump, conservatives have to engage in this task.

NR

Under Fire

The NRA finds success and setbacks in the Trump era

BY JIM GERAGHTY

Dallas

A RECORD 87,154 members, hunters, and gun owners attended this year's National Rifle Association annual meeting in early May, and for the first time ever, the U.S. president and the vice president addressed the attendees in the same afternoon. It was a potent show of political force from the organization, after it had endured a hurricane of critical media coverage following the school shooting in Parkland, Fla.

"The National Rifle Association is the only organization in America that gets blamed for crimes our members don't commit," said Chris Cox, executive director of the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action, its political and lobbying arm, to a crowd of roughly 10,000 attendees. "The 5 million law-abiding men and women of the NRA will not accept one shred of blame for the acts of madmen and the failures of government."

The NRA stuck its neck out to help Donald Trump in 2016 when a lot of other right-leaning groups, such as the Koch network, stayed on the sidelines, and the Trump presidency has brought the group some considerable wins. Despite an enormous media push for gun control after the Las Vegas and Parkland shootings, the administration and Congress have made no real move beyond two proposals that the NRA supported: an administrative rule banning bump stocks, and the Fix NICS Act, a law strengthening the background-check system. And the NRA's fundraising is up.

Most notably, Trump nominated Supreme Court justice Neil Gorsuch and a slew of other new federal judges who are expected to have a friendly perspective on the Second Amendment. The importance of Gorsuch can't be overstated, says one conservative campaign consultant who has worked with the NRA in the past. "Everything the NRA did [to elect Trump] is worth it, even if Gorsuch was the only

thing they ever got from him. It can be argued that the *Heller* and *McDonald* decisions are the most important Second Amendment cases ever, and Hillary Clinton effectively said she would undo them. Getting a conservative justice here will be important for a long time."

Also, after just two months in office, Trump and the GOP Congress rescinded a controversial regulation enacted at the end of the Obama presidency. The rule required the Social Security Administration to report to the attorney general individuals receiving certain kinds of mental-health disability benefits, so that this information could be used in background checks. The American Civil Liberties Union, as well as the NRA and other gun-rights groups, argued that there were no data indicating that individuals collecting those kinds of benefits have a propensity for violence in general or gun violence in particular.

Legislative changes, by contrast, have been slow and intermittent.

Start with the NRA's top priority in Congress, concealed-carry reciprocity. There are currently more than 16 million holders of concealed-carry permits in the United States, up more than 250 percent since 2007. Many states recognize permits from other states, but such recognition is not universal—meaning that gun owners can unwittingly stumble into serious criminal charges, as in the highly publicized case of Shanteen Allen, a single mother of two who had a valid concealed-carry permit in Pennsylvania. Pulled over for an unsafe lane change while driving to Atlantic City, N.J., Allen was charged with unlawful possession of a firearm and possession of hollow-point bullets, and faced a minimum three-year prison term—all for bringing a legally owned gun and ammunition across a state line. She was ultimately pardoned by New Jersey governor Chris Christie.

The federal reciprocity proposal would make gun permits, like driver's licenses, valid across state lines. If your home state trusted you to carry a concealed weapon, every other state would be required by law to trust you as well. In 2013, 57 senators—44 Republicans and 13 Democrats—voted for the idea.

In December, the House of Representatives passed its version of reciprocity, but the Senate has yet to consider it, and no one knows when or whether the Senate will. Democrats are expected to filibuster,

meaning reciprocity supporters would need 60 votes. After the Alabama special election and with Senator John McCain often out of Washington being treated for cancer, a unified GOP caucus would need nine or ten Democratic votes in the Senate.

"It's the strongest reciprocity bill ever to get through the House," says one consultant who's worked with the legislation's lead sponsor, North Carolina representative Richard Hudson. "The Senate needs to act while Republicans have the majority and a chance. . . . You have to advance your policy aims on the floor when you control the floor. The House did that."

But it's not too hard to guess how Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer would direct his caucus to vote if reciprocity came to the floor: Assuming McCain's absence, precisely eight vulnerable red-state Senate Democrats would be cleared to vote "yes." These Democrats could use the vote in campaign ads to emphasize how they're different from the rest of their party—and the measure would fall two votes short, ensuring that no Democrat who opposed the measure could be labeled "the deciding vote" in campaign ads.

Adding to the NRA's difficulties is that Trump's rhetoric on guns has been a high-stakes roulette wheel. In a February White House meeting with congressional lawmakers, Trump careened off the tracks, endorsing raising the age to purchase a firearm to 21, appearing to endorse Senator Dianne Feinstein's assault-weapons ban, scoffing that most senators are afraid of the NRA, telling House majority whip Steve Scalise—a shooting survivor!—that concealed-carry reciprocity will "never" get passed, and telling Vice President Mike Pence during a discussion of restraining orders that could permit gun seizures, "Take the guns first, go through due process second."

That last comment was the sort of rhetoric that, if spoken by President Obama, could have set off furious protests. But it's rather revealing that few gun owners thought Trump would actually follow through on his suddenly pro-gun-control comments; Washington is starting to get used to the president's unpredictability and rapid reversals.

When Trump goes wrong, he goes really wrong. But when Trump is on, he's on, and he's embraced arguments about gun rights and the virtues of an armed



An attendee inspects a handgun during the NRA Annual Meetings and Exhibits, May 5, 2018.

populace that many other Republican lawmakers are hesitant to endorse.

“In terms of rhetoric, there’s nobody who’s been better than Trump on this stuff,” says John Lott, a gun-policy researcher and president of the Crime Prevention Research Center. “Coming out and talking about arming teachers—could you imagine [George W.] Bush doing something like that? Trump is at least talking about something that would matter, that’s related to these attacks, like the danger of gun-free zones.” It’s easy to forget that George W. Bush expressed support for extending the assault-weapons ban in 2003 before it expired the following year—and never addressed an NRA convention.

Legislative battles at the state level haven’t been easy for the NRA this year, either. After the Parkland shooting, Republican Florida governor Rick Scott, now running for Senate against incumbent Democrat Bill Nelson, signed a bill raising the state’s age to purchase a rifle from 18 to 21. The NRA filed suit against the ban in federal court, contending that it “totally eviscerates the right of law-abiding adults between the ages of 18 and 21 to keep and bear arms.” Scott attended the 2017 NRA convention but canceled plans to attend this year’s. It’s unclear whether the NRA will support

Scott in his Senate bid or if so how enthusiastically. In 2014, the NRA rated Scott “A+” and endorsed him; in 2012, the NRA rated Nelson an “F.”

Scott may find himself in a situation similar to that of Pennsylvania senator Pat Toomey, an NRA favorite until he sponsored a background-check bill with West Virginia Democrat Joe Manchin. In 2016, the NRA declined to endorse Toomey and downgraded him to a “C.” But his Democratic challenger, Katie McGinty, earned an “F.”

In Oklahoma, Governor Mary Fallin mildly surprised and disappointed the NRA in mid May when she decided to veto a “constitutional carry” proposal, which would have made it legal to carry a gun without a permit. Cox noted that Fallin had supported constitutional carry when she ran for reelection in 2014 and pledged, “Make no mistake, this temporary setback will be rectified when Oklahoma residents elect a new and genuinely pro-Second Amendment governor.”

“I was surprised by it; she could have signed it and it wouldn’t have caused any political fallout,” sighs the GOP consultant who worked with Hudson. “Second-term governors do unusual things.”

Elsewhere, many states are considering or have passed legislation to create or expand “red flag” laws allowing the

seizure of a person’s firearms if a judge determines him to be a threat to himself or others. The NRA announced in March that it supports the concept but is wary about the way these laws are written in many states. The organization contends that one proposal passed by the Illinois house and senate in May would allow gun seizures “based on third party allegations with little, if any, real evidence and limited ‘due process’ for the respondent. Hearings for the orders would be ex parte, where the respondent is not present to challenge the accuser and defend against allegations made against them.”

With the outlook for continued GOP control of the House cloudy, a narrow window of opportunity for pro-gun legislation may be closing. And if the midterms live up to the “blue wave” hype, the NRA may spend much of the next cycle on defense. In 2017, Republicans were shellacked in Virginia’s state legislative races, and Lott calculates that if they “had lost one seat more, [Democrats] would have gotten a lot of different types of gun-control legislation through.”

He thinks he and his allies could be extremely busy starting next January. “Wherever Democrats win in 2018, the first bills out of the gate will be gun-control bills.”

NR

Ireland Repeals The Eighth

And continues its transformation away from Catholicism

BY MICHAEL BRENDAN DOUGHERTY

AMERICA partly inspired the Eighth Amendment to Ireland's constitution. And so it is fitting that pro-life Americans should note its passing. Shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court discovered a right to privacy in the 1965 case *Griswold v. Connecticut*, an Irish supreme court, in 1974, discovered a previously unknown right to "family privacy" in the Irish constitution. Both worked to facilitate the sale or use of contraception. The *Griswold* precedent was important to deciding *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion. Anti-abortion activists in Ireland could sense what was coming if they did not act.

And so they endeavored to run around their liberal judiciary by putting an explicit recognition of the right to life of an unborn child in their constitution. It was the only law in the Western world that fully articulated what committed pro-lifers believe: "The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right." After an acrimonious public debate, the Eighth Amendment was passed in 1983, supported by 66.9 percent of Irish voters. This May that amendment was repealed by a nearly identical share of voters, 66.4 percent. In its place, a new text is provided under the heading "Fundamental Rights": "Provision may be made by law for the regulation of termination of pregnancy." In 35 years, Ireland's social, economic, and political life had utterly transformed. This flip on the Eighth Amendment was only the latest evidence.

The scale of the result was a shock to many, even on the pro-repeal side. And it is a reality check for pro-lifers worldwide, who have felt for a generation that trends in popular understanding of human development in the womb, or of the social and psychological damage that abortion can

inflict, were on their side. Ireland, which for many pro-lifers was the model for legal protection of unborn human life in the Western world, is now the first nation in Europe or the Americas to bring in abortion by popular referendum. And, unlike the justices on America's Supreme Court, and the parliamentarians of the United Kingdom, Irish voters did this while knowing full well what they were doing.

Irish voters had the benefit of advances in our knowledge of embryology. They also knew that legal abortion would not be limited to the so-called hard cases of rape, incest, and "fatal fetal abnormality." They knew that in countries with laws comparable to the ones their legislature proposed to enact, the elective-abortion rate had climbed until abortion had become the end for roughly one in five pregnancies. They voted as they did knowing that Dublin is one of the only European cities where people with Down syndrome are regularly seen in the streets, and knowing that the reason for this was that Ireland had the Eighth Amendment.

Repeal of the Eighth Amendment carried every county save Donegal. Every age group voted for repeal except for those over 65. The youngest cohort of Irish voters was by far the most pro-repeal. The late intervention of Google and Facebook, which banned or scrutinized advertising during the campaign, turned out to be entirely unnecessary. The vote was so decisive that Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, who the night before had told colleagues that there should be no celebration however the vote went, belatedly acknowledged the crowd of pro-choice revelers descending on Dublin Castle. He tweeted a picture of himself gazing at them, with the line "Fantastic crowds at Dublin Castle. Remarkable day. A quiet revolution has taken place, a great act of democracy." For those unschooled in Canadian history, a "quiet revolution" refers to the rapid secularization of law and society in the once devoutly Catholic province of Quebec.

What happened to Catholic Ireland? Sober expression on this matter was difficult to find in recent weeks, but *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole tried. "The remarkable thing, indeed, is not that the official Catholic Ireland died but that it lingered so long," he wrote. "It is astonishing to think, for example, that it is less than a quarter of a century since a proposal to remove the ban on divorce—the most flagrantly Catholic provision in

the Constitution—was passed by a margin of fewer than 10,000 votes."

Why didn't Catholic Ireland hang on longer? The history is a long one. Having been one of the only native institutions that were allowed to grow after Emancipation in the 19th century, the Catholic Church and its various religious bodies were positioned to act as a kind of civil service for an independent state short of resources, at least in matters of health, social policy, and education. But this role in Irish life made the Church a part of almost every Irish calamity. And in the generation since that divorce referendum, the failures of Irish institutions and Irish society in the 20th century have been ceaselessly scrutinized: from the mother-and-baby homes in Tuam, where babies of unwed mothers died without sufficient medical treatment and were buried unceremoniously, to the industrial schools such as the Christian Brothers' school at Artane, where children of the poor were treated like convicts, to an adoptions system that often operated illegally and with standards that in retrospect look no different from child trafficking. The Catholic Church was implicated in all these crimes.

An honest and balanced examination would point out that the Irish state and society were also implicated in these failures, that many of these tragedies were produced not simply by the imposition of religious doctrine by a handful of celibate clerics but also by the curious intersection of Irish poverty, Irish adoption of Victorian bourgeois morality, a devoutly Catholic society, and an embrace of 20th-century institutionalized approaches to social problems. But it was almost impossible to have a balanced and calm discussion when at the same time that these failures were being unearthed, the Catholic Church in Ireland, the one that educates the vast majority of Irish children in its schools, was revealed to have enabled and then hidden from justice the clerical perpetrators of child rape. In an environment such as this, the Church may preach mercy but would be foolish to expect any.

It is a commonplace in Ireland to say that the Church has lost its authority on moral questions. But that is almost beside the point. The Church in Ireland has experienced the humiliation of having its sins exposed without ever getting around to the penance. It carries on managing schools and hospitals but is so fearful of

exciting public wrath that it hardly ventures to do anything in Irish life that might draw attention. Even if it had moral authority, the Church would be terrified of exercising it. Naturally, its bishops barely said a word about the referendum.

Another way to look at Ireland's transformation from a deeply Catholic society to a liberal one is to note that it is an increasingly integrated part of the global Anglophone culture. It merely lagged behind other nations in its social transformation because it was, until recently, a much more rural society than the United Kingdom or America. But since the 1960s, it has been reshaped by the same mass culture produced in London, New York, and Hollywood. And it has urbanized rapidly. In 1960, most Irish people lived in rural areas. Now well over 60 percent are classified as living in urban centers, putting Ireland roughly between Eastern European countries and its Western European neighbors in population density.

Although Irish laws against abortion seem to have suppressed Ireland's abortion rate, abortion was increasingly a commonplace of Irish life. Even in the early 1980s, when the Eighth Amendment passed, hundreds of Irish women each week made the trip to Liverpool or London to have abortions. More recently many Irish women have been ordering abortifacients by mail, and these have not been impounded by customs. Ireland has joined fully the Western European and American way of life when it comes to marriage, sex, and childbearing. And that way of life includes abortion.

For now Irish social conservatism has a hunted quality. Until recently, all the major parties in Ireland save for Labour were considered socially conservative. In the last election Fine Gael leaders Varadkar and Simon Coveney were understood to be pro-life politicians. So too was Micheál Martin, the leader of Fianna Fáil, the party assumed to have the most socially conservative voters and elected parliamentarians. But without much public debate, all of the above-mentioned men came out in support of repeal after their last election and ahead of the referendum. And all of them are generally supportive of the proposed legislation that would make abortion easy to obtain up to 24 weeks' gestation.

With bishops gone from the field and the leaders of all the major parties supportive of repeal, the burden of arguing for retaining the Eighth fell almost exclusively

to a handful of socially conservative media figures, most of them associated with the Iona Institute, a socially conservative think tank. With no political party taking up their cause, it was easy for Irish media outlets to cast them as unrepresentative of any important strand of opinion in Irish life and to heap abuse on them.

To pro-lifers in Ireland, the political fallout has a surreal or even absurdist quality. Somehow the overwhelming result for repeal has transformed such a figure as health minister Simon Harris into a political superstar. His vocal campaigning for repeal got him declared a champion of women's health. Yet it was Harris who, weeks earlier, could not even begin to tell the media the number of Irish women who had died early deaths in a recent health scandal in which a laboratory subcontracted by the government had misinformed scores of women about the results of their cervical-cancer checks. How could a man leading a health ministry directly culpable in the early deaths of many women be a champion of women's health? Only by elevating an ideological test over reality.

And in that strange juxtaposition is perhaps the tiny glimmer of hope for Ireland's social conservatives. In the wake of the

referendum, journalists and campaigners have indulged in triumphalism. Some have lobbied for people at the Iona Institute to be henceforward excluded from debates of public issues. Journalists and commentators have declared that the new, liberal, and progressive Ireland is a fact now, old Ireland having been once and for all slain. If liberal Ireland is now ascendant, then the failures, injustices, and dysfunctionality of Irish society and governance will henceforward take the shine off liberal ideas. Catholic Ireland ran roughshod over some. And liberal Ireland will do the same.

For the rest of the world, Ireland may contain another discomfiting lesson—namely, that there is no exception. When it comes to family matters, social liberation comes as a package deal. At least for now, societies that are permissive in matters of sex and divorce will be societies in which abortion is not only demanded as a right but becomes common. Ireland is merely catching up to the rest of the West. The question for Ireland and the West more broadly is how long this way of life remains sustainable or even pleasant for those in it. In 35 years, quite a lot can change.

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Taiwan's Challenge

It continues to carve out its own identity, despite Beijing's wishes to the contrary

BY THEODORE KUPFER

Taipei

THE battle over boarding-pass nomenclature became an instructive episode in contemporary cross-Strait relations once the United States joined in. As part of its long-standing strategy to marginalize Taiwan internationally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) often directs international corporations to refer to Taiwan as a Chinese territory. This fits the "one-China principle" that is Beijing's mandate. It also omits the fact, uncomfortable for the Communist Party of China, that a prosperous Chinese democracy thrives on that fractious island. Nonetheless, Western companies—Marriott, Gap—tend to roll over once the command is given and apologize for any language that treats Taiwan as what it functionally is: a free nation.

But on May 5, the White House rebuked the practice when President Trump issued a statement accusing the PRC of resorting to "Orwellian nonsense." Orwellian nonsense indeed: Taiwan, officially the Republic of China (ROC), is a sovereign democracy with clearly defined borders, its own military, and a burgeoning national identity. Yet despite this, and despite the Trump administration's statement, several airlines have heeded China's demand—making the episode all the more illuminating.

The statement was a shot in the arm for the tiny island. Over lunch held to welcome a group of foreign journalists (of which NATIONAL REVIEW was a part), a Taiwanese foreign-affairs official effusively praised the statement. But it was bookended by a series of setbacks: On May 1, the Dominican Republic severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan and established them with the PRC; on May 7, Taiwan was officially excluded from the World Health

Assembly, one of the few international conferences to which it had recently been invited. On May 24, Taiwan lost another diplomatic ally in Burkina Faso. The PRC policy of diplomatic quarantine is increasingly successful.

Decades ago, Taiwan benefited from diplomatic contacts with anti-Communist nations that refused to engage with the PRC and openly chose sides during the Cold War. That was once the United States' position, but *realpolitik* and the desire to partner with a fellow opponent of the USSR led Richard Nixon to travel to China in 1972 and Jimmy Carter to transfer recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979.

Ever since, American policy has rested on two seemingly incompatible planks: 1) There is one China, and its capital is in Beijing; 2) as a democratic and open society whose prosperity, safety, and geographic location serve American interests, Taiwan is entitled to military protection from the United States. Somewhere in the space between these two positions lies our "one-China policy," distinct from the one-China principle in that the U.S. is unwilling to declare Taiwan a PRC territory and stresses its abiding interest in finding a peaceful resolution to the dispute in the Strait. This has held a delicate situation in balance for decades. Lately, however, Beijing's growing confidence in its hard power and Taiwan's growing confidence in its own independence have led to more-explicit demands for clarity on the question.

Despite the implication in the "ROC" moniker that the legitimate government of all China is temporarily sheltered on the island of Taiwan, the struggle over who rules the mainland is no longer contested. Instead, what is now contested is the palpably false notion that Taiwan has no claim to nationhood. For years, Taipei's government was a one-party operation ruled by Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang party (KMT). (Chiang had fled from the mainland, protected by American naval cover, when his KMT lost the Chinese Civil War to Mao Zedong in 1949.) This gave Americans wanting better relations with the mainland rhetorical ammunition to charge that Taiwan was no more democratic than the PRC. But the democratic wave reached Taiwan's shores in 1986, when the KMT recognized the

Democratic Progressive party (DPP) as its opposition.

The island's political culture has adopted democracy with exuberance. Here, elections are regularly, bitterly, and openly contested. The KMT, which once kept offices nominally representing each mainland province, no longer stresses the lost dream of unification. Today, it preaches amicable relations with China, its supporters forming the anti-independence Blue coalition. Supporters of the DPP form the pro-independence—or at least independence-curious—Green coalition. The DPP rejects the 1992 Consensus, under which the two countries agree that there is "one China" but, like modern literary critics, form their own interpretations of what that means.

President Tsai Ing-wen was elected in 2016, giving the DPP control of both the presidency and the legislature for the first time. Younger Taiwanese constitute the bulk of the emerging DPP majority, and have no nostalgia for either the mainland or the old Chiang regime. Research conducted by National Chengchi University confirms two salient trends: Support for unification has been falling for decades, and a growing number of citizens consider themselves to be exclusively Taiwanese.

"As far as the DPP is concerned," Mainland-Affairs Deputy Minister Chang Tien-chin explained, "Taiwan is already independent." On the other side, a KMT politician recently told the *Financial Times*: "Of course we are against Taiwan's independence, but we don't think right now is the time to talk about reunification." Though there are no plans to enshrine independence in the constitution, which contrasts the "free area of the Republic of China" with the "mainland area," the Overton window is shifting.

Chinese settlers, hailing from different regions of the mainland, began relocating in the 17th century, pushing aside the aboriginal Formosans, who today represent 2 percent of the population. But as Perry Anderson wrote in the *London Review of Books*, Taiwanese national identity does not reduce to "cultural claims of difference." "The principal definition of national identity," wrote Anderson, "lies instead in the contrast between democracy on the island and dictatorship on the mainland."



Lotus Lake, Kaohsiung, Taiwan

That bodes well for the country's democratic health. Sure enough, democratic politics flourish here. Participation is relatively high in national elections, with issues such as pension funding and LGBT rights attracting robust civic debate. The government is experimenting with ways to crowd-source public opinion on issues before legislation reaches the floor, part of its innovative open-government initiative. And internationally, says the vice president of the nonprofit Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, Taiwan aims to be the "hub of democracy in East Asia."

Of course, the existence of a free China is unacceptable to the PRC. Communist Party propaganda maintains that the values of Chinese people simply are at odds with democracy. Because Taiwan represents a glaring counterexample to that claim, China is bent on making life as hard as possible for the island.

When Taiwanese elections were relatively new, China tried to disrupt politics with military might. In 1996, it fired ballistic missiles toward the island to intimidate voters into voting against the DPP candidate, sparking a crisis that ended only when the U.S. Navy sent aircraft carriers in Taiwan's direction. That year,

the KMT candidate won in a landslide. But four years later, Chen Shui-bian became the first DPP president.

Luckily for the PRC, however, Taiwan's economy relies heavily on access to the huge mainland market. Taiwanese companies export tens of billions of dollars' worth of goods to China, Taiwanese manufacturers use Chinese natural resources, and a large, though falling, percentage of foreign direct investment from Taiwan goes across the Strait.

As Anderson points out, this entanglement complicates the struggle for independence. Other "settler nations," such as Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Australia, were able to secure nationhood as they became independent from their faraway imperial rulers. Taiwan, on the other hand, depends on China for prosperity—and is a mere stone's throw away.

This gives China plenty of leverage, which, naturally, it exploits. "Like the U.S.," Deputy Minister of Development Chiou Jiunn-rong ruefully explains, "Taiwan has been hurt by Chinese economic policies" such as joint-venture requirements and the theft of intellectual property. China also uses its economic leverage over *other* countries to hurt Taiwan. Take the "one belt, one road"

initiative, a neo-colonial enterprise in which China builds infrastructure for developing countries across Eurasia in exchange for assumed future payoffs—and for those countries' ruling out any relations with Taiwan. As it turns nations such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan into satellite states, China manages to enrich itself while shortening the list of potential Taiwanese allies.

Taiwan's population is aging; its economy, one of the major success stories of the late 20th century, has stagnated in recent years; and a "brain drain," whereby skilled Taiwanese and successful local businesses depart for the mainland, is under way. An estimated 1 million Taiwanese live across the Strait.

But the country has intelligent leaders who are aware of these challenges. One of Tsai's priorities is an economic pivot to southeast Asia designed to unshackle Taiwan's economy from the mainland. Taiwan has a history of making itself indispensable in global markets by finding, and dominating, a niche: Hence it is the world's second-leading producer of integrated-circuit designs, an essential part of the supply chain for consumer electronics. Now, the minister of science and technology is orchestrating a shift in policy to

emphasize software and artificial intelligence, doling out grant money to professors and offering financial incentives to local companies. This might manage to keep the economy afloat.

In terms of hard power, however, Taiwan can't go it alone. The mainland has been testing the limits of the free world's commitment to the island. China's increasingly bellicose stance in the South China Sea is accompanied by a buildup in amphibious capability, and Chinese fighters have been flying ever closer to Taiwanese airspace in recent months. Mainland-affairs officials argue that China won't risk a potentially catastrophic military conflict with the United States just to reclaim sovereignty over Taiwan, but it's hard to think they aren't unnerved.

Enter the U.S. Taiwanese officials were encouraged by Trump's phone call to President Tsai at the beginning of his presidency and heartened by his May 5 statement reproving the PRC's airline shenanigans. For its part, Congress has passed the Taiwan Travel Act, opening the door to high-level contact between American and Taiwanese officials. Rejoining the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (to which Taiwan is not a party) would counteract China's ambition of regional hegemony and be another helpful step.

Taiwan certainly would welcome a concerted effort to upgrade relations. So should Americans. Trump's aim is to win the contest with mainland China for regional supremacy; fostering closer ties with Taiwan would further that goal. Beijing uses the reductionist bromide of the one-China principle to insist that Taiwan is the property of the PRC. It follows that if the People's Liberation Army decided to launch itself across the Strait and bring Taiwan to heel, that would be an internal Chinese affair. But any one-China policy worth keeping should reject that obviously false predicate. Even if the U.S. doesn't recognize it explicitly, we should support the sovereignty of Taiwan for strategic and moral reasons alike. Some presidents have kept the island at arm's length to preserve a working relationship with the Communist mainland. Trump would be well advised to take a different tack. His statement criticizing Beijing is a promising sign—but the issue extends beyond the boarding pass. **NR**

Standing Tall for China

*The story of a
Tiananmen Square survivor*

BY JAY NORDLINGER

Oslo

FANG ZHENG looks like an athlete, which he is. Broad chest, muscular arms—and a sturdy head of hair to top it off. Yet he sits in a wheelchair and has no legs. What happened? He was run over by a tank in Tiananmen Square.

In fact, he wears a T-shirt that says, "Remember June 4"—the day in 1989 when the Chinese government sent in soldiers to massacre student protesters. For almost 30 years now, the government has labored to cover up the massacre (which they call "the June Fourth Incident," in delicate euphemism). Fang Zheng makes it harder.

He is a guest at the Oslo Freedom Forum, the annual human-rights gathering in the Norwegian capital. I have

was to make some kind of contribution to the country and bring glory to China."

The year 1984 was very big—because China was participating in the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Communist China had been largely absent from the Olympics. "We felt that China was finally part of the world," says Fang Zheng. He was 17 years old at the time and glued to the television. The Chinese women's volleyball team beat the United States to win the gold medal. That was huge. It was natural for Chinese hearts to swell with pride.

Fang Zheng went to Beijing Sports University, where he was a track-and-field star—a sprinter. His plan was to be a teacher in the sports department of a teachers' college. In 1987, he joined the Communist Party. And in 1989, when he was in his senior year, he joined the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square.

He had no hesitation in doing so. "At the time, China was relatively open and free," he says, "even within the Communist Party. We were thinking about curbing corruption, reducing bureaucracy, and getting freedom of speech." Party members and non-members alike had been inspired by Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union.

The demonstrations went on for about a month and a half. Tensions between the students and the government mounted, coming to a head in that first week of

On the morning of the 4th, as the sun rose, **the Party unleashed hell** on the students.

some questions for him, which he readily answers.

Fang Zheng was born in Hefei City, Anhui Province, in 1966—the first year of the Cultural Revolution (that spasm of insanity, depravity, and murder, which lasted ten years). His father was "a civil servant in a small agency," he says. "Just an ordinary worker." The family was like a great many other families in China. "We all pretty much suffered," says Fang Zheng.

In the late 1970s, the Communist Party began to reform the country. This was exciting for Fang Zheng, along with everyone else. He dreamed of being an athlete. So did other boys (and girls, surely). In school, he says, "our biggest dream

June. A female classmate of Fang Zheng's, younger than he, was afraid. She wanted to stay by his side. "Sure," he said. "I'm a man and I will protect you. You'll be safe with me."

On the morning of the 4th, as the sun rose, the Party unleashed hell on the students. Bullets flew over the heads of Fang Zheng and his companion, ricocheting off the Monument to the People's Heroes, creating showers of sparks. Some of the bullets flew directly into the students. The tanks rolled, knocking over the statue of the Goddess of Democracy, which the students had constructed.

Suddenly, there was an explosion, a gas bomb. The air was thick with smoke, Fang Zheng remembers. "We were suffo-

cating and nauseated. We couldn't see anything." His companion fainted. "I picked her up, in order to move her to the side. As I was doing that, I noticed a tank heading straight for us." He pushed the young woman out of the way, but could not quite save himself. "The tank ran over my legs, and then I felt it drag me for some distance, with a thumping sound."

Before he lost consciousness, he glimpsed the exposed bones of what remained of his legs. He says that he is grateful to "the people who rescued me and stopped me from bleeding to death."

How many people were killed at Tiananmen Square? The government said a couple of hundred. In December 2017, the British declassified a cable from their ambassador at the time, Sir Alan Donald. The cable was dated June 5, the day after. Sir Alan said he had learned from a well-placed source that the government killed at least 10,000. He had some grisly details, too.

"Students linked arms but were mown down. . . . APCs [armored personnel carriers] then ran over bodies time and time again to make 'pie.'" The remains were collected by bulldozers, then burned, "then hosed down drains."

Fang Zheng was taken to a hospital, for surgeries. The student he had rescued visited him several times, thanking him profusely. Later, she denied that she had been with him when he was injured. This was the result of tremendous government pressure, as the authorities were trying to cover up the whole massacre. "I can understand why she did it," says Fang Zheng. "She wanted to continue her education, she wanted to have a job, her family needed to live in China." (The families of those who cross the Party are reliably punished.)

He has not seen her since. Does he forgive her? "Of course," he says. "There's nothing to forgive. I completely understand."

The pressure on Fang Zheng to lie about what had happened was very, very great. They wanted him to say that he had been injured in a road accident. Alternatively, they wanted him to say that he and his fellow students had attacked the army, drawing a response. He refused to tell any lies.

Others decided to lie—to play along. "I know a man who was injured by a tank," says Fang Zheng, "and in order to continue his studies and go abroad, he



Fang Zheng

signed an affidavit saying that his injury was caused by a bus, not a tank."

It would have been much, much easier for Fang Zheng to take this route. Why did he not? "They were saying that the Party's interests were over people's interests. I disagreed with this. I thought that human beings should be over the Party. I insisted on the truth. I thought it was more important" (than the Party).

Fang Zheng quit the Party, finding it irredeemable. "In the past, we opposed Mao Zedong and the cult of personality. After June 4, I saw that the problem was the Party itself, and the system itself. I believe in democracy and checks and balances. Only with that can we avoid disasters in the future."

Fang Zheng started training again, as a disabled athlete. How did he find the will? Bitterness would have constrained many in his situation. "I had no bitterness," he says. "After I lost my legs, I still had my love of sports, and this love made me want to train as soon as I could."

In 1992, three years after Tiananmen, he won two gold medals at the All-China

Disabled Athletic Games. The medals were in the discus and the javelin. Fang Zheng was due to participate in international competition—but the authorities forbade him, because of the "political sensitivity" of his injury.

For 20 years, the authorities harassed and hampered Fang Zheng. First, they denied him a college degree. Second, they denied him work. Third, they restricted his movements, barring him from Beijing, for example. They made life as difficult as possible (and it had already been made very difficult at Tiananmen Square).

Then came the 2008 Olympic Games, hosted by Beijing. Foreign media knew about Fang Zheng and took an interest in him—which made Party officials nervous. They did not want to be seen as the oppressor of this disabled hero. So they granted him a passport on August 28, 2008. The following January, the entire family got visas for the United States.

That family consisted of Fang Zheng, his wife (they married in 1999), and their daughter. Later, they would have two more daughters.

In the weeks leading up to the family's departure, the government played a game with Fang Zheng—alternately threatening him and seducing him, in an effort to get him to stay. Even when he and his family were at the airport, he was not sure whether the government would allow him to leave. There were many foreign journalists at the airport, waiting to see what would happen. The family was allowed to take off.

For these past 20 years or so, they have lived in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The 2008 Games were a boon to Fang Zheng personally. But does he think that China should host Olympic Games? (In 2022, Beijing will host its second set of games, the Winter Games.) No. Before the 2008 Games, he notes, the Chinese government made promises to the international community—promises to liberalize. The government, of course, reneged on those promises. The next time around, when 2022 was discussed, the international community barely tried, says Fang Zheng. No one expects or demands concessions from the Chinese Communist Party.

Like most other people who care about China, Fang Zheng is appalled by the rule of Xi Jinping. It is the most repressive since Mao's, he says.

In America, Fang Zheng heads a foundation—the Chinese Democracy Education Foundation—and does what he can to further the cause of his country (the liberalization of it). He is especially determined that the Tiananmen Square Massacre not be forgotten, or falsified. The Chinese government bans commemorations of the massacre and blocks online discussions of it.

Here in Oslo, I observe Fang Zheng for a few days. He seems cheerful, confident—even serene. Frankly, he radiates good health. Does he have internal battles, in view of all he has endured? “I try to live as normally as possible,” he says. “Everyone faces challenges. I have difficulties such as pains in my body. I try to overcome them. I just want to live every single day well.”

When he was a schoolkid, he wanted to bring glory to China through athletic prowess. He has brought glory to China, all right—through his courage, moral and physical, and through the example he has set. Above all, he has insisted on telling the truth: the awful, important truth. **NR**

Monkey Hear, Monkey Laugh

On the so-called humor of Samantha Bee

BY KEVIN D. WILLIAMSON

THE great tragedy of George Carlin's life was that he stopped being funny before he stopped performing comedy. The great tragedy of Samantha Bee's life is that she stopped before she started.

Watching Carlin's final HBO special, *It's Bad for Ya*, is a useful illustration of the social power of comedy. The program runs for 67 minutes, during which Carlin never quite manages to say anything that is funny—it is not even obvious that he is trying to. He's angry and bitter, though in a way that's more like George Carlin doing a George Carlin impersonation than anything suggesting genuine rage. And what would he be raging about? He lived a life of privilege and ease: educated privately in

that are not actually funny can still get a laugh provided they are presented in the form of a joke, or with the familiar comedic bump-set-spike vocal modulation and other stand-up genre conventions. There is tremendous subconscious social pressure to laugh when presented with something that is *shaped* like a joke—how many times have you seen somebody laugh at a joke he didn't get? Humor is in part an exercise in tribe building: When we have shared emotional responses to shared stimuli, we feel like a community rather than a mere group. That is as true of watching stand-up comedy as it is of watching *Macbeth*, reading the daily newspaper, or attending Easter Mass. These are things we do together, and from that they derive their aesthetic power and their ability to build and strengthen communities.

This may very well be hardwired into us in the so-called mirror neurons that fire in primates both when they perform an action and when they see that action being performed by another. Tribes are hierarchical, and primate brains are evolved to accommodate those hierarchies: A paper authored by scientists at Duke and published in the March issue of *Scientific Reports* finds that mirroring (“interbrain cortical synchronization”) is strongly influenced by social status—among monkeys, at least. Among humans, social status can be permanent or

There is tremendous subconscious social pressure to laugh when presented with something that is *shaped* like a joke.

Christian schools, sent to a beloved summer camp in New Hampshire (he was so fond of it that he had his ashes scattered there after his death, a strange gesture for a man who claimed to reject superstition), and sustained by a 36-year marriage that ended with the death of his first wife—all while he grew immensely wealthy mocking the bourgeois values and institutions that shaped and sheltered him. He was, in that sense, a typical product of the 1960s counterculture.

What's interesting about late-period Carlin is that it illustrates how things

situational: A celebrity has high status, a person standing on a stage at the center of attention has high status, and George Carlin in performance was both. Hence his remarkable ability to say the most banal things to uproarious laughter. From *It's Bad for Ya*:

There's just enough bullsh** to hold things together in this country. Bullsh** is the glue that binds us as a nation. Where would we be without our safe, familiar, American bullsh**. Land of the free. Home of the brave. The American dream. All men are equal. Justice is blind. The press is free. Your vote counts. Business is honest. The good guys win. The police are on

Mr. Williamson is a Texas-based writer.

your side. God is watching you. Your standard of living will never decline. And everything is going to be just fine. The official national bullsh** story.

Can you find the funny part? You would not laugh without a reasonably skilled (and preferably famous) comedian showing you where you are supposed to laugh. Comedy, like tragedy, has its origin in ritual. Stand-up comedy is simply comedy post-Vatican II: The officiant faces the congregation rather than the altar.

No doubt a great many people laughed when Samantha Bee called Ivanka Trump a “feckless c***.” They laughed when Bill Maher called Sarah Palin a “c***” and a “dumb tw**.” They laughed when Howard Stern called Sarah Palin a “c***,” too. Palin really brought it out in them. So did Hillary Rodham Clinton, labeled a “toxic c***” by Fox News fixture Ted Nugent and targeted by professional Donald Trump sycophant Roger Stone with a political group called “Citizens United Not Timid.” The United States has a much more robust free-speech culture than do many of our English-speaking allies: In Australia, a man was convicted of a minor crime for calling former prime minister Tony Abbott a “c***” on a sandwich board (the conviction was later nullified), and a London blogger was charged with “grossly offensive malicious communications” after labeling a Conservative councilor a “c***” on Twitter. Samantha Bee has done a little groveling of the usual dishonest kind: She calls her actions “inexcusable” while asking—and obviously expecting—to be excused for them, silently invoking the assumption that progressives’ hearts are always in the right place, even when their expletives are all over the place.

Samantha Bee has never to my knowledge said anything that is funny. Her business is the sort of thing that would be of keen interest to those monkeys in the Duke study: the ritual raising and lowering of *status*—which, as Tyler Cowen and Arnold Kling and others have argued, is what politics is mostly about. The same holds true for media criticism, which is of course only another form of politics. Professor Cowen: “I have a simple hypothesis. No matter what the media tells you their job



Samantha Bee

is, the feature of media that actually draws viewer interest is how media stories either raise or lower particular individuals in status. . . . The status ranking of individuals implied by a particular media source is never the same as yours, and often not even close. . . . Indeed that is why other people enjoy those media sources, because they take pleasure in your status, and the status of your allies, being lowered.”

Samantha Bee does not sell humor or satire: She sells status adjustment. She got her start on *The Daily Show*, which of course is nothing more than an extended, tedious, witless exercise in concentrated status-lowering: hence all that chest-pounding excitement every time Jon Stewart DESTROYED! somebody or another, which is precisely the sort of thing that gets the ol’ chimp juices flowing.

Calling Ivanka Trump a “feckless c***” on television is a win-win for Bee et al.: One possibility is that Ivanka Trump offers no response, in which case her status is lowered by her being obliged to endure outrageous insults by a relative nobody on TBS; the second possibility is that she responds, in which case her status is lowered by her being obliged to condescend to respond to the outrageous insults of a relative nobody on TBS. The proverb holds that the problem with wrestling a pig is that you both get dirty but only the pig enjoys it. Samantha Bee is that pig.

It’s a piggy world out there, which is why every anonymous coward on social media claims to be a multimillionaire investment banker and special-operations veteran (with a super-hot girlfriend somewhere in the Niagara Falls area, no doubt) when he wants to bolster whatever nonsense he’s claiming on any given Tuesday night. Hence the “YOU’RE JUST JEALOUS!”—they mean “envious”—response to criticism of President Donald Trump. It’s the same monkey business.

It isn’t about being right or wrong. It’s about being a big enough deal to call Ivanka Trump a “c***” and get away with it. Which, of course, is what’s most likely to happen. This isn’t some pleb such as Roseanne Barr we’re talking about.

Samantha Bee on her worst day, like Samantha Bee on her best day, is a reminder of one of the most underappreciated facts of public life in the 21st century: Mass democracy has no intellectual content. It is, as David French and others have noted, simply an extension of high-school cafeteria-table politics: status-jockeying and status-monkeying 24/7/365.25 and not much else. It doesn’t do much for the country, but it beats working for a living. Keep that in mind the next time you find yourself muttering “Hell, yeah!” when your favorite multimillionaire cable-news rodeo clown lays the rhetorical smackdown on one of his multimillionaire Central Park West neighbors two buildings over while you’re stuck in traffic commuting home to the suburbs from downtown wherever.

A place for every monkey, and every monkey in his place. **NR**



Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn speaks at Harvard, June 8, 1978.

My Harvard Speech In Retrospect

Solzhenitsyn's reflections on his critics

BY ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

IN the winter of 1978 an invitation to give a commencement speech at Harvard suddenly arrived. Of course I could have declined, as I had done in 1975, and with hundreds of other invitations. But Harvard is a place of significance, and my speech would be heard throughout America. I had not given a speech in two years, and my temperament was pushing me once again to speak out. So I accepted the invitation.

When I began to prepare my speech in the spring, I found that, beyond my aversion to eternal repetition, I could not and did not want to return to previous directions or hit previous

notes. For many years in the USSR, and for four years now in the West, I had kept slashing and hacking away at Communism, but in these last years I had also seen in the West much that was alarmingly dangerous, and *here* I preferred to talk about that. Giving expression to the new observations that had accumulated within me, I built my speech around Western matters, about the weaknesses of the West.

Unlike the case with my other speeches, I wrote this speech out, and Irina Ilovaiskaya [*Solzhenitsyn's secretary*] translated it into English. Knowing the West very well, she was extremely worried and upset, and tried to persuade me to soften my ideas and words. I refused. After the speech had been translated and printed out, in tears she told Alya [*Solzhenitsyn's wife*]: “He will not be forgiven for this!”

My speech was announced in advance, and what was mainly expected of me (they later wrote) was the gratitude of the exile to the great Atlantic fortress of Liberty, singing praises to its

Mr. Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) won the 1970 Nobel Prize in Literature. This excerpt is reprinted from Book 1 of his memoir Between Two Millstones: Sketches of Exile, with permission from University of Notre Dame Press, © 2018 by University of Notre Dame. The chapter excerpted here was written in autumn 1978, shortly after the Harvard address that it describes. The translation is by Peter Constantine.

BETTMANN/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY IMAGES

might and its virtues, which were lacking in the USSR. And needless to say, they expected an anti-Communist speech. The evening before, during the formal gala dinner, I had the honor to sit with the president of Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama, his black skin almost purple in hue, his face betraying fatigue, and also with the former president of Israel, Ephraim Katzir (Katchalsky), who very much called to mind a good-natured Ukrainian peasant, but one keeping his plans to himself. And the nervously restless Richard Pipes—a man of great influence at Harvard, and who almost singlehandedly runs the studies of Russia here in America—came over to meet me and find out if it was true that my speech was to center on Cambodia. (That would indeed have been an issue well worth talking about.)

The following day, June 8, people took their seats under the open sky in Harvard Yard, the graduates according to their fields, then the guests, and a large crowd of people standing—some 20,000 in all, I was told. The president of Harvard congratulated the graduating students, after which honorary doctorates were given to the president of Botswana, to Katzir, to the Danish anthropologist Erik Erikson (who had a remarkable countenance), and to me—and to my surprise, the crowd rose to its feet and gave me a standing ovation; clearly the myth surrounding me had yet to be dismantled here. Then Harvard graduates marched across the yard (at their head an old man, who had been of the class of 1893), as did we, the honored guests, students calling out greetings to us, and then everyone again took their seats. When the moment came for me to speak, it began to rain heavily. We on the podium were protected by a canopy, but everyone else in the crowd was exposed to the rain, and as I was speaking I was amazed that some people opened umbrellas, others didn't, but that everyone remained sitting in the rain, nobody hurrying away! And my speech, along with the translation, took an hour, twice as long as it normally would have, loudspeakers broadcasting it to all the corners of Harvard Yard.

I was also amazed at how often and how vigorously people applauded, something I had not expected, especially when I was talking about the importance of leaving behind materialism. This heartened me. At times they whistled, which is also, it turns out, a sign of approval, but there was another sound too, a drawn-out “ssss,” the way we call for silence in Russian, and that, on the contrary, was a sign of disapproval. (Later, I was to learn that on that same campus at an earlier time there had resounded the sharpest protests against the Vietnam War.)

After my speech the university asked me for the text, and it was immediately printed, with some 2,000 copies handed out, and there began a bacchanalian dissemination of arbitrary excerpts and quotes from it throughout the U.S. and around the world. The university received over 5,000 requests from twelve countries. (Here again: Things that I had said elsewhere that had fallen on deaf ears, now, coming from America, were listened to by the entire world, as if for the first time!) The tireless TV stations, which had recorded my entire speech, broadcast it that very evening along with a discussion. Of all this, Alya and I that night only managed to catch that the Voice of America was broadcasting the whole speech, in my voice, to the Soviet Union.

The following day and a half was like an excursion into the past. In the evening, Harper & Row threw a dinner for us in Harvard's dining hall, and the aged Cass Canfield hobbled over to see me: He had been the one who had once behaved so capriciously over *First Circle*, and had ultimately prevailed,

with conditions that were humiliating and disenfranchising for me. One should not nurse old grudges, but seeing him there was unpleasant. The next day we went to the Connecticut home of my translator, Thomas Whitney—his friend Harrison Salisbury was there too—both of whom had ended up taking my side in the Carlisle affair [*some complications with the initial publications of Solzhenitsyn's books in the West—NR*]. That evening, our host had gathered together a few choice guests, Arthur Miller and his circle, New York's elite.

On the following day we returned home, at which point there began—for a good two months!—an unending rush of agitated newspaper responses to my speech, and then also a flood of letters from Americans. Irina Ilovaiskaya read the letters and made summaries, while I myself read many of the articles. And I must say I was quite taken aback by the connection (or rather the *lack* thereof) between the criticism and the actual content of my speech.

I HAD given my speech the title “A World Split Apart,” and it was with this idea that I had opened the speech, that mankind is separated into original and distinct worlds, distinct independent cultures that are often far removed from one another and frequently unfamiliar with one another (I had then listed some of them). One has to renounce the arrogant blindness of evaluating these different worlds merely within the context of their development toward the Western model. Such a benchmark is the result of a misunderstanding of the essence of those different worlds. Also, one has to stand back and look soberly at one's own system.

Western society in principle is based on a *legal* level that is far lower than the true moral yardstick, and besides, this legal way of thinking has a tendency to ossify. In principle, moral imperatives are not adhered to in politics, and often not in public life either. The notion of *freedom* has been diverted to unbridled passion, in other words, in the direction of the forces of evil (so that nobody's “freedom” would be limited!). A sense of responsibility before God and society has fallen away. “Human rights” have been so exalted that the rights of society are being oppressed and destroyed. And above all, the press, not elected by anyone, acts high-handedly and has amassed more power than the legislative, executive, or judicial power. And in this *free* press itself, it is not true freedom of opinion that dominates, but the dictates of the political fashion of the moment, which lead to a surprising uniformity of opinion. (It was on this point that I had irritated them most.) The whole social system does not contribute to advancing outstanding individuals to the highest echelons. The reigning ideology, that prosperity and the accumulation of material riches are to be valued above all else, is leading to a weakening of character in the West, and also to a massive decline in courage and the will to defend itself, as was clearly seen in the Vietnam War, not to mention a perplexity in the face of terror. But the roots of this social condition spring from the Enlightenment, from rationalist humanism, from the notion that man is the center of all that exists, and that there is no Higher Power above him. And these roots of irreligious humanism are common to the current Western world and to Communism, and that is what has led the Western intelligentsia to such strong and dogged sympathy for Communism.

At the end of my speech I had pointed to the fact that the moral poverty of the 20th century comes from too much having been invested in sociopolitical changes, with the loss of the Whole and the High. We, all of us, have no other salvation but to look once more at the scale of moral values and rise to a new height of vision. “No one on earth has any other way left but—upward,” were the concluding words of my speech.

Not once throughout the entire speech did I use the word *détente* (they expected me more than anything to condemn it once again), nor did I make appeals for Communism to be overcome, and only in the background, as an aside, did I mention that “the next war . . . may well bury Western civilization forever.”

And what did the *crème de la crème* of the educated classes and the press hear in this speech, and how did they respond?

What surprised me was not that the newspapers attacked me from every angle (after all, I had taken a sharp cut at the press), but the fact that they had *completely* missed everything important (a remarkable skill of the media). They had invented things that simply did not exist in my speech, and had kept striking out at me on positions they expected me to hold, but which I had not taken. The newspapers went into a frenzy, as if my speech had focused on *détente* or war. (Had they prepared their responses in advance, anticipating that my speech would be like the ones I had given in Washington and New York three years earlier?) “Sets aside all other values in the crusade against Communism . . . Autocrat . . . A throwback to the czarist times . . . His ill-considered political analysis.” (The media is so blinkered it cannot even see beyond politics.)

In the first days the press spouted scalding invective: “He has flung his gauntlet at the West . . . Fanatic . . . Orthodox mystic . . . Fierce dogmatic . . . Political romantic . . . Conservative radical . . . Reactionary speech . . . Obsession . . . Has lost his balance . . . Has missed the point . . . Sounded like the wanderings of a mind split apart” (a pun on the title of my speech).

And then they came to the “consequences”: “If you don’t like it here, why don’t you leave?” (This came up in several newspapers, and more than once.) “Why, if life in the United States is so deplorable and venal, should he have chosen to live here? . . . Mr. Solzhenitsyn, don’t let the doorknob hit you in the rear on the way out . . . As you don’t like anything else here, it’s not unkind of us to point out that you don’t have to stay here . . . Love it or leave it . . . Would somebody please send [him] an airline schedule for overseas flights, east-bound.” They were particularly irritated that, when I said “our country” in my speech, I was referring to the Soviet Union and not to America. “If there is one thing I cannot abide, it is the guest who . . . lectures you on your faults. After getting out of Russia one step ahead of the KGB, Solzhenitsyn turns around and condemns us, his hosts, as having too much freedom”—(I admit that’s quite ironic)—while enjoyably “living in peace and freedom . . . It was America who saved his homeland from Hitler’s horde.” (Though one might argue about who saved whom.)

Before my Harvard speech, I naïvely believed that I had found myself in a society where one can say what one thinks, without having to flatter that society. It turns out that democracy expects to be flattered. When I called out “Live not by lies!” in the Soviet Union, that was fair enough, but when I

called out “Live not by lies!” in the United States, I was told to go take a hike.

I was furthermore reproached, and in no uncertain terms, that I was criticizing the same Western press that had saved me in my battles in the Soviet Union. That did seem like ungratefulness on my part. But I had marched into battle prepared to die, without expecting to be saved. I had written in *The Oak and the Calf* that “Western sympathy began to grow warmer and warmer until it reached an undreamed-of temperature.” But now they regret having helped me. Had the Bolsheviks exiled me to Siberia in 1974, the West would have been happy to look the other way, especially after reading my *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*. Kissinger and Pope Paul VI had come to the conclusion as far back as 1973 that I should not be defended.

ALMOST at the same time that I was speaking at Harvard, President Carter was giving a speech at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, fervently praising America. “In contrast to Carter, who spoke of the American way of life in almost evangelical terms,” Solzhenitsyn was full of criticism, lamented *Newsweek*. A few days later the first lady, speaking at the National Press Club, almost overstepped the bounds of propriety, stating specifically in answer to me that there was no spiritual decline in America but that there was prosperity on all fronts. Now a great wave of justification of the United States swept throughout the press: “He does not grasp the American spirit . . . We are irresponsible, he tells us. We put our freedom first, before our responsibility” precisely “because we are a free people.”

The major newspapers did not print the actual speech, despite there being no copyright restrictions, but only passages convenient for their censure. “He arrived complete with preconceptions about American decadence and cowardice . . . Has no particular use for freedom, and little for democracy . . . Does not comprehend that there is strength, great strength, in our weakness, [even in] naïveness and non-monolithic government, [which] may be incomprehensible to a traditional Russian.” And through many articles there echoed: He is too Russian, he is incorrigibly Russian, his experience is limited to things Russian, he does not understand. “A voice from Russia’s past . . . a nineteenth-century Slavophile . . . He despises our press . . . The unspoken expectation was that after three years in our midst, he would have to say we are superior. [Could he] at least have given one cheer for the extension of freedom to a whole society? . . . Didn’t we publish his books? Wouldn’t that be reason enough for gratitude? . . . Most Americans will cringe at the thesis . . . that ‘people have the right not to know’”—(I had spoken about “the forfeited right of people *not to know*, not to have their divine souls stuffed with gossip, nonsense, vain talk”—A.S.)—or that “commercial interest tends to ‘suffocate’ spiritual life . . . His conclusions made Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* sound recklessly optimistic . . . The giant does not love us . . . [He points] obliquely and indeterminately to a regeneration of ‘spiritual life.’ . . . [The speech only] indicates the weakness of Harvard’s ability to get an honest American [to address the graduates]. Thank God for being an American.”

Harrison Salisbury, who had initially defended me on television, saying that a rural philosopher was perfectly capable of

seeing the big picture from his retreat, now also expressed surprise: “Can Solzhenitsyn, in a sense, be the opposition government for the Soviet Union and also the United States? That’s an enormous burden to be put on anyone’s shoulders.”

But even in the initial unified chorus of condemnation, there were also appraisals of my speech (more vocal with every passing day) that did not focus on its political elements, but kept comparing it, dozens of times, to Biblical prophecy, and me to the old American Puritans. “Poured out doomsday warnings . . . Renewed a tradition of apocalyptic prophecy . . . Struck responsive chords in many American breasts . . . It’s been a long time since we heard a Puritan like this. Increase Mather was president of Harvard once, and he would have looked like a moral weakling compared to Solzhenitsyn . . . He shook the country with a magnitude-9 earthquake, a bitter truth.”

Soon evaluations of the initial newspaper reactions to my speech began to appear: “An avalanche of critical misunderstanding . . . Touched a raw nerve [with the press] . . . An intellect of great force and appetite, Solzhenitsyn stirred up a hornet’s nest . . . Seldom has so much earnest controversy arisen from a single speech by a private citizen, and seldom has the preponderance of response so widely missed the mark . . . He attacked the media for self-assurance, hypocrisy and deceit and they will never forgive him for it . . . Liberals usually blush at the word ‘evil’ [but Solzhenitsyn] has looked at one of hell’s faces.”

As more readers’ reactions (albeit watered down and cut by the editors) and articles of thoughtful journalists made their way into the newspapers, and the press in the heartland began

right through America’s flab . . . The American people will sustain Solzhenitsyn on this count . . . The *Washington Post* may smile at the Russian accent of Mr. Solzhenitsyn’s words, but it cannot detract from their universal meaning . . . Let us be grateful before it’s too late . . . His speech ought to be burned into America’s heart. But instead of being read, it was killed . . . Can the press maintain diversity when ultimate control rests in the hands of a small group of corporate executives?”

Gradually another America began unfolding before my eyes, one that was small-town and robust, the heartland, the America I had envisioned as I was writing my speech, and to which my speech was addressed. I now felt a glimmer of hope that I could connect with this America, warn it of what we had experienced, and perhaps even lead it to change direction. But how many years would that take, and how much strength?

And how was I to conduct such a battle, calling for a fight to the death against Communism, yet without in any way targeting Russia? And this in a situation where wily polemicists of the Third Emigration [*the wave of émigrés allowed to leave in the 1970s*—NR] were not only clouding the realities of Russia with their lies, but, in an unexpected turn, were spreading the credo that the true Russia, as opposed to the Soviet Union, is a far greater danger to the West than the current benign Communist regime, which must be supported, though kept in check by maintaining adroit negotiations.

In the wake of the Harvard invitation, there also came one from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point: The adjutant general offered to gather together the entire student body, over 5,000 students, and I could lecture on any subject I chose. It

Gradually another America began unfolding before my eyes, one that was small-town and robust, the heartland, the America I had envisioned as I was writing my speech.

to enter the discussion, the tone of voice in the assessments of my speech became significantly more varied: “What he said was unadulterated truth and the truth can hurt at times . . . There is no greater gift an exiled stranger could bring us . . . We should thank him for being man enough to stand before our young people and point to a better way, a way of law that honors right . . . We had better heed the wisdom of Solzhenitsyn . . . Reconsider the Harvard address—not primarily as an attack, but as a plea to the entire human family.”

Finally, a graduate of Harvard, Wanda Urbanska, who had heard my speech, also managed to get her opinion into a newspaper: The address “ruffled many assumptions about ourselves and the world that Harvard has so carefully groomed.” Why, she asks, does one newspaper columnist presume to speak on graduates’ behalf? She concludes: Solzhenitsyn “challenged us; he bothered us; and he will stay with us.”

Now one could also begin to read many responses that were markedly distinguished from the arrogant stance of the America of New York and Washington: “We know in our hearts he is right . . . We are worse than he says we are if we do not face up to our faults and try to do something to correct them . . . Solzhenitsyn is right, too awfully right . . . Brilliant and courageous Harvard speech cut like a two-edged sword

would be an ideal platform from which to steer America in a new direction! West Point is a tribune of American presidents, and there would be a strong and sympathetic crowd, not like the brooding Harvard audience. What listeners could it be more important to convince? A severe and decisive place: These very students were going to be the military leaders on the battlefields of the Third World War and the administrators of the regions near the front. If not in them, then in whom did American hatred need to be deflected from Russia? Who, if not they, should be the first to be told of the betrayals of the First and Second World Wars, the first to whom the difference between the USSR and Russia should be explained? It would have been an ideal blow against the Communists. I was very much inclined to go to West Point, but Alya rightly dissuaded me: How would such a speech be perceived back home in Russia? If, after speeches I had given at *trade-union* conventions I had been falsely accused of insisting that Russia be brought to her knees by starvation, then a speech at the *military* academy would be taken as my fraternizing with the “American imperialists.” The end result would have been the exact opposite of what I intended. So I was forced to decline the invitation.

The Harvard speech unleashed echoes that kept resounding far longer than I could have foreseen.

NR

Redefining Disability

It shouldn't be an all-or-nothing proposition

BY ROBERT VERBRUGGEN

AN odd thing has been happening since the middle of 2014, according to a recent analysis of Census Bureau data from the economist Ernie Tedeschi. The number of prime-age (25–54) Americans who are out of the work force, and say they do not work because they are disabled, has declined about 7 percent, reversing a trend that had been in place for decades. The disabled have become more likely to rejoin the work force and less likely to leave it to begin with.

The Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) rolls show a similar pattern, peaking in May 2014—the one month in history they topped 11 million, having almost tripled since the mid 1980s. As of last month, they stood at about 10.3 million, and the shift in the trend line has been so dramatic and unexpected that it's caused confusion about when, exactly, the beleaguered program will run out of money. A 2016 report from the program's trustees predicted that 2023 would be the year of doom; last year's report put it at 2028; this year's, 2032.

Either working-age Americans got a lot healthier all of a sudden, or in reality there are jobs that can accommodate a lot of these individuals, especially when the economy is booming, unemployment is about as low as it's gotten in half a century, and companies are scrambling to find help.

These new developments, aside from being great news in themselves, are just the latest pieces of evidence for a proposition that ought to be common sense: “Disability” is a category with fuzzy boundaries. Many people have ailments that pose an obstacle to work but need not prevent them from working entirely. And this is a reality that our disability programs largely fail to recognize.

At minimum, this failure reduces work for a significant share of enrollees who are capable of it; at most, it may have substantially contributed to a shocking, decades-long decline in labor-force participation among prime-age men (and, since the turn of the century, prime-age women too). Either way, it needs to be fixed—even as, for now, a strong economy is pulling many off the disability rolls all by itself.

IN theory, SSDI—the nation's biggest disability program but not the only one, focusing on those below retirement age and with a significant work history—isn't supposed to cover borderline cases at all. To qualify for benefits, people must be unable to perform any

“substantial gainful activity” that would pay even \$1,180 a month (\$14,160 per year, roughly the income from a full-time, minimum-wage job), whether in their previous field of employment or in another field they could plausibly enter. In addition, their condition must be expected to last at least a year or until death.

It is inevitable that such decisions will be subjective to an extent, though—and since the program's standards were loosened in the 1980s, ailments that are difficult to verify have accounted for a rising share of awards (today more than half of SSDI recipients have mental-health or musculoskeletal conditions such as joint pain), and the judgments of applicants' personal physicians have taken on a greater role in the process. The share of working-age adults who were on the program grew from 2.2 percent in the late 1970s to 4.4 percent in 2013. Population aging does account for much of this growth, but far from all of it.

Experts broadly agree that disability programs can discourage work. In a review of the evidence earlier this year, the University of Maryland economists Katharine G. Abraham and Melissa S. Kearney drew attention to several rigorous studies of the question—in particular, those looking at situations where applicants were assigned to disability examiners or appeals judges who varied in their leniency, allowing researchers to see what happened when similar applicants were denied or given benefits.

One study suggested that, for the 23 percent of applicants with marginal health conditions—meaning they might get benefits or not, depending on how lenient their examiner was—receiving benefits reduced employment by 28 percentage points. This implies that for every 100 people in this group granted benefits, 28 go on not to work who otherwise would have.

There is strenuous disagreement, though, about exactly how much disability programs are to blame for the overall drop in labor-force participation among prime-age men. In 1967, just 3 percent of these men were neither working nor looking for work: not “unemployed,” but out of the labor force entirely. In 2016, that number was 12 percent. And while women flooded into the work force in the second half of the 20th century, since then they too have been slowly leaving.

In *Men without Work*, his 2016 book on the topic, Nicholas Eberstadt of the conservative American Enterprise Institute noted survey data from 2013 indicating that 57 percent of prime-age men out of the work force received disability benefits, whether from SSDI or other programs—a figure that had risen from 38 percent in 1985. (People tend to underreport their government benefits in surveys, so both of these numbers are likely low.) As correlation does not prove causation, however, Eberstadt hedged his argument, claiming that whether or not rising disability receipt *caused* men's flight from work, it has *financed* it.

In a recent report for the libertarian Mercatus Center, Scott Winship took a different approach to the issue, looking at a Census Bureau survey question asking why prime-age men hadn't worked during the previous year and checking to see which explanations had risen the most over time. More than a third of the decline of work since 1968

was nothing to worry about, resulting from men becoming more likely to be in school at later ages, to stay home to care for family, or to retire early. But 47 percent of the decline came from an increase in men saying they didn't work because they were disabled or sick.

Winship pushes aside several explanations for the trends. Contrary to some claims from the left, wages for low-skilled men are not declining once inflation is properly accounted for—and just 9 percent of the drop comes from men who say they can't find a job—so it's not that there just isn't enough demand for these men's skills. It's also unlikely that men increasingly face health problems that make them unable to perform the available jobs, as workplace injuries are down, exercise has increased, rising obesity doesn't cause much labor-force dropout, and employed men are taking less sick leave than they used to.

One plausible explanation, Winship suggests in an accompanying essay, could be that “the payoff for not working has increased,” including payoff through disability programs. This finds some support in a 2013 analysis from the Congressional Research Service, which noted that SSDI awards have grown faster than wages for low earners.

Abraham and Kearney, though, present a very different analysis, roughly echoing earlier findings by the Obama administration's Council of Economic Advisers. Extrapolating from the research on SSDI and a disability program for veterans—including the above study estimating a 28

dysfunctional way—in particular owing to the “all or nothing” nature of benefits—and struggling financially as well. In 2015 Congress was forced to transfer money from Social Security's retirement funds to SSDI, and as mentioned above, it will run out of money again in 2032.

Last year, the *Washington Post* profiled an Alabama man struggling with the question of whether to apply for disability. He in fact had health problems but was still able to work and was trying to find a job. And in cases such as this one, the decision to apply for disability is highly consequential. As the *Post* noted,

most people aren't employed when they apply for disability—one reason applicant rates skyrocketed during the recession. Full-time employment would, in fact, disqualify most applicants. And once on it, few ever get off, their ranks uncounted in the national unemployment rate, which doesn't include people on disability.

The decision to apply, in many cases, is a decision to effectively abandon working altogether. For the severely disabled, this choice is, in essence, made for them. But for others, it's murkier. Aches accumulate. Years pile up. Job prospects diminish.

In other words, after the difficult decision to apply, the next choice is simple: You can't work, because by doing so you'd prove you are capable of working. This begins during the lengthy approval process; even rejected applications typically take one to three years with appeals. And this

The current system is structured in a dysfunctional way—in particular owing to the ‘all or nothing’ nature of benefits—and struggling financially as well.

percent employment drop for 23 percent of the SSDI-applicant population when granted benefits—they estimate that the expansion of these benefits caused a 0.2-percentage-point decline in the employment-to-population ratio after 1999. (This ratio, as the name implies, measures whether people are employed, regardless of whether they're looking for work. It includes both sexes and everyone 16 or older.) The overall ratio declined 4.5 points, or 3.6 points after changes in the age and sex composition of the work force have been accounted for, so the benefits were not a major contribution to labor-force dropout. Abraham and Kearney charitably call it “not inconsequential.”

Far more important were the kinds of demand-side factors that Winship pooh-poohs: expanded trade with China, which Abraham and Kearney credit with a full point of employment decline, and increased automation, which gets more than half a point.

WHETHER disability reform can meaningfully combat the decline of work or would just help the share of applicants who can work but struggle to, it is imperative. The current system is structured in a

period, often right after someone becomes disabled, happens to be the most important time. It's an opportunity to avoid a spell of joblessness on one's résumé and work out accommodations, if possible, with an employer in one's field. Then, once an individual is accepted to the disability rolls, earning beyond the modest “substantial gainful activity” threshold can trigger a review to ensure he still qualifies for the program.

To be fair, it's far from true that SSDI does *nothing* to encourage work. Beneficiaries are periodically reevaluated to ensure they are still disabled, with more frequent reviews for those whose conditions are expected to improve. Those who are self-motivated to get back into the work force have opportunities as well, including a “trial work period” in which they can earn money without losing their benefits, an “extended period of eligibility” in which their benefits can be restored after leaving the program for a job that didn't work out, and voluntary rehabilitation. Light work, providing income that falls below the “substantial gainful activity” threshold, is also allowed.

But there are plenty of aspects to the program that should operate differently, to ensure that those able to work have the incentives and assistance they need to do so. They range from obvious fixes, such as tightening up the definitions of

mental-health ailments and speeding up the application process, to far more technical tweaks. Eventually the system needs an almost complete overhaul, though changes should likely begin with an extensive series of pilot programs to test the reforms, as the Trump administration has proposed in its 2018 budget.

One of the most common suggestions is to award temporary or partial benefits to those who face genuine obstacles to work and yet are not completely unemployable. In a report late last year for the American Enterprise Institute, Tejesh Pradhan and James C. Capretta proposed such a benefit that would be smaller than traditional SSDI payments (which vary case by case but average about \$1,000 a month) but would not disappear as quickly when beneficiaries earned more at their jobs.

Pradhan and Capretta would also mandate physical therapy or treatment for applicants who might benefit from it—before their applications are even considered. By the same token, the disability pilot programs envisioned in Trump’s budget proposal focus “on early intervention return-to-work initiatives that would help the individual worker maintain attachment to the labor force.”

A more controversial idea, though one with some bipartisan support in the think-tank world, is to “experience-rate” employer taxes: Whenever a worker went on disability, his former employer’s taxes would go up. (A similar rule is already in place for unemployment and worker’s-compensation benefits.) This could be handled through the existing payroll-tax system or, as proposed in a 2010 report from the liberal Center for American Progress and the Brookings Institution’s Hamilton Project, by bringing in private disability insurers, who would have an obvious incentive to get people back to work.

The idea is to give employers an extra reason to keep the workplace safe and to accommodate injured workers so they don’t go on disability. A risk, however, is that employers would refuse to hire workers who are more likely to go on disability in the future. And there’s a question of fairness as well, because SSDI covers all disabilities that keep people from working, not just those stemming from injuries in the workplace itself. The business lobby would likely push back, but it is an idea worth exploring, considering that the Netherlands has seen enormous success with reforms based on the concept of making employers more responsible for their workers’ disability claims.

The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, a bipartisan think tank focused on reducing the deficit and debt, has also dived into the debate, publishing an ongoing series of detailed proposals to shore up the program. Beyond ideas broadly similar to some of those outlined above, suggestions thus far have included subsidizing temporary employment to ease those with disabilities back into the work force, as well as limiting the “double payments” that occur when people are eligible for unemployment in addition to disability insurance.

We are, obviously, far from figuring out exactly what the ideal disability system would look like. We can be confident, though, that it bears little resemblance to our own—and that dramatic improvement should be a priority. **NR**

Dictator Lit

An absurd and horrifying genre

BY DOUGLAS MURRAY

A FAIR number of books can be counted a disgrace to literature. But only a special type of book stands as an embarrassment to printing. At the very top of this pile are the books written by dictators: the only works written for audiences that can accurately be described as captive.

On a shelf alongside me as I write is one such book, from the relatively lighter end of the genre. The *Ruhnama* (also known as “The Pink Book”) is the work of Saparmurat Niyazov—also known as “Turkmenbashi”—who was the first post-Soviet ruler of Turkmenistan. Though this was a gift from a friend who visited that country, similar works dotted around the shelves are the results of my own travels. These include tracts, seminal works, and compilations such as Saddam Hussein’s *On Democracy*. It is a relief to discover from a new book by Daniel Kalder, *The Infernal Library: On Dictators, the Books They Wrote, and Other Catastrophes of Literacy*, that an interest in this branch of publishing is shared by at least one other person.

Unreadable though all these books are, they all contain a worth beyond that of merely satisfying curiosity. Obviously there is value in anything that records the motivations, ideas, and limitations of various dictators. But these strange artifacts are also a cautionary tale for bibliophiles. For just as all readers must at some stage contend with the question of why some of the kindest and most decent people have never read a book, so in these volumes we must accept that some of the worst people in history have thought it desirable to be known not just as thinkers but specifically as authors. And while most books add (in however small a way) to the sum of human knowledge, here are examples of a select group that turn that received wisdom on its head: volumes that actively aspire to limit human knowledge, divert it, drain it—and even burn it.

So far as I can tell (and this is not a settled science), dictator-authors generally divide into three groups: those who wrote books and then became dictators; those who wrote books in order to become dictators; and finally those who wrote books because they were already dictators.

The first class includes Mussolini. It was not obvious that he was going to rule Italy when he wrote his 1904 pamphlet “Man and Divinity: God Does Not Exist,” or his racy 1910 novel *The Cardinal’s Mistress*. With Hitler it was different. The prison writing project that became *Mein Kampf* turned out, despite the original critical panning and poor sales, to prove useful to Hitler’s rise to power in a way that *The Cardinal’s Mistress* never could have been. Or to put it another way, Mussolini did

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not insist on constant reprints of his juvenilia for distribution among the masses after he achieved power.

Yet it is the third class of dictator literature—the book written around, or after, the achievement of power—that is the most interesting example of the genre. And the most interesting precisely because it is the least interesting, indeed positively painful, branch of this literature to try to read. These works are not so much books as anti-books, having come into existence not because the author wanted to write them (let alone because an audience wished to read them) but because the author needed to produce them and an audience needed to be forced to respect them.

For in these volumes the book became a tool to demonstrate to the masses why the person ruling over them had the right to do so. It communicated, for instance, that their ruler was above all things wise. And it is this that makes the dictator books slightly fascinating. They are not written to clearly or lucidly communicate ideas but rather are objects into which almost any combination of words and thoughts might be poured, so long as the result could be presented as that dictatorial vanity tool: “a book.”

It is into this group that most of the “colored” books go. Chairman Mao’s “Little Red Book,” Colonel Qaddafi’s “Green Book,” and of course Turkmenbashi, coming up last (when all the other colors had been chosen) with his pink book. Colonel Qaddafi’s Green Book, written in the 1970s after he reached power, may be said to typify the editor-less (or editor-terrified) style. Here is a typical paragraph:

Women are females and men are males. According to gynaecologists, women menstruate every month or so, while men, being male, do not menstruate. . . . As man does not get pregnant, he is not liable to the conditions which women, being female, suffer.

Menstruation and crop cycles are certainly overwhelming preoccupations of the author. And yet Colonel Qaddafi believed (or claimed to believe) that this book was a “gospel” that would lead the masses to “worldwide revolution.” Which was just one reason that it was important in all the dictator books of this genre that the audience at home be sustained with the lie that the book they were instructed to venerate had an equally big (or at least growing) reputation outside the country (the reputation of the work inside the country being impossible to heighten).

Perhaps I allow the *Ruhnama* to sit on my shelf because it is the most bathetic and pathetic end of this horrible genre. Whereas the Green Book and the Red Book were able to be published in cheap editions, the *Ruhnama* attempts to proclaim its significance from its production values on. Printed on thick, wipe-clean paper and weighing so much that it feels as though lead has been woven into the spine, the sole work of the late Turkmen dictator purports to consist of “reflections on the spiritual values of the Turkmen.” As well as repeated insistences that his countrymen are directly descended from Noah, whenever Turkmenbashi feels his inspiration flag there are sudden rallying cries of “Oh Turkmen!” or “My dear people!” To further awe the reader, facsimile pages of the working manuscript are included. From a man who renamed the days of the week in his country after his mother, there is inevitably some reflection on parenting. Otherwise this “national book” includes patriotic hymns and poems, some regional quasi-history, and some even more quasi-philosophy. Before Turkmenbashi died and passed the running of his country over to his dentist, a vast statue replica of the pink book was erected in the capital of Ashgabat. This hideous object was cranked open on special occasions.



Saparmurat Niyazov, dictator of Turkmenistan and author of the ‘Pink Book’

THE one retrospective consolation for the unfortunate citizens of Turkmenistan and Libya might be that at least their leader had written only one central book that they were expected to revere. By contrast, the Kims in North Korea have produced an almost unbelievable quantity of volumes. And though it appears that the current leader, Kim Jong-un, has not yet made his mark on publishing, it would be understandable if he felt compelled to do so. For as well as being the third-generation ruler of that Marxist monarchy, Kim Jong-un is also heir to one of the most diarrheically prolific families ever to engage in book printing.

On a visit to the country several years ago, I picked up as many books and pamphlets as I could carry back in my bags. And with the exception of a single, slim cookbook, all are by or about the Kim dynasty. Indeed, it seemed from conversations with locals, as well as from an examination of those books available in the bookshops I was allowed into, that almost no reading material was available that was not written by the ruling family. At such moments the outside world's attitude of slight amusement at the oddities of the Kims becomes a glimpse into the horror of what living under them must really be like. Just as the flowers are all named after the Dear Leader, and the songs are all by or about the same subject, so even the one respite that people might have in a dictatorship (to escape into your own thoughts and there to roam free) was taken away by the Kims. In North Korea even the garden of literature is claustrophobically narrow, barren, coated in ideological AstroTurf and locked on each side.

experience?" Kim Il-sung's restrained answer to this question fills only three succeeding pages.

His son and successor spread his wings slightly farther, writing about passions other than Juche. But the tone is always the same: that of a man writing in a land not only without any critics, but without any possible editors. Kim Jong-il's 1989 work *On the Art of the Cinema* is a treatise on every aspect of filmmaking and contains insights such as these: "An actor inevitably acts the parts of various types of people living at different times. Yesterday he portrayed a worker, but today he may be a peasant or he may represent a student, even though previously he was a Party worker. The actor should therefore be prepared to play anybody at any time."

AND here is the moment of ugliest overlay around books by dictators. In the rear-view mirror of history, let alone from the safety of another continent, it is easy to mock these books. "Turgid," "unreadable," "banal," and every other damning word in the lit-crit armory can certainly, and without exception, be applied accurately to these works. Yet at the same time such words get us nowhere. It is like using a whelk-pin to try to land a whale. Daniel Kalder falls into this trap on occasion, such as when he writes of Hitler that his "métier was talking rubbish, not scribbling it on paper."

Because of course none of this helps. If we had been unfortunate enough to have grown up in Turkmenistan at the turn of our century, the pink book would not have been just a hideous object

‘Turgid,’ ‘unreadable,’ ‘banal,’ and every other damning word in the lit-crit armory can certainly, and without exception, be applied accurately to these works. Yet at the same time such words get us nowhere.

As my haul from that trip showed, the collected works of Kim Il-sung and his son and heir, Kim Jong-il, span scores upon scores of volumes. Most of these works claim to explain Kim Il-sung's fundamental "Juche idea," which was his attempt to apply some reading of Marx to a North Korean context. His efforts to claim these vague results as a unique philosophy, especially suited to the North Korean people, were built upon by Kim Jong-il in such works as *On Correctly Understanding the Originality of Kim Il Sung-ism*. Of course the whole thing was a crock: a "philosophy" whose authors could not have been any more certain about the nature of this idea than they allow their readers to be. But then the dictator has no critic, only legions of terrified servants willing to scoop up his emetic utterances and agree that they are worthy of the most authentic form of preservation that recent centuries have discovered.

Few of either man's public utterances were not compiled into edited volumes such as *Answers to the Questions Raised by Foreign Journalists*, vol. 4 (1991). A typical example of these questions is this one (from October 16, 1986) from "the editor in chief of the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Massa*": "Your experience in the struggle to build a new society has won worldwide admiration. Mr. President, would you please tell me briefly about this

but one of the most important objects in our lives. In school we would have had to learn portions of the book by heart. Hell, we would have had to study it just in order to obtain a driver's license. And this book—so far as dictators, their books, and their worst practices go—is among the least harmful in dictatorial history. Imagine the Iranians who read the sections of Khomeini's Blue Book adjudicating on various bodily activities and then worrying themselves to sleep. Or the countless Libyans who must have tried to understand Qaddafi's Green Book and wondered why its meaning still eluded them. Or the Koreans even now who must lie awake at night wondering where Juche ideology comes from and even daring to wonder whether it—or the regime that invented it—might ever stop.

That is what makes this niche of publishing so disturbing: It is the written word not as a mental liberator but as a control mechanism, a reminder that even the book, perhaps the most civilizing method of education and communication ever devised, can be turned against itself and become a satire on itself. And while some of these volumes are transparently, sometimes hilariously, risible at a distance of time and space, they are also a reminder that with different luck, in another time and a different place, they might have had to be everything to us. All draw us to the same conclusion: Look on my words, ye people, and despair. **NR**



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The Long View

BY ROB LONG

From the Twitter feed of Kim Jong-un, @youthcaptain

DM @realDonaldTrump Hey, so it looks like this thing is on, right? We're going to meet in Singapore?

DM @youthcaptain Looking that way, my friend. People are saying Trump is so smart.

DM @realDonaldTrump People are saying, Hey, that Kim, he's a player. People are saying that Kim should be with a new girlfriend like Carrie Underwood or Mayim Bialik. People are saying that.

DM @youthcaptain You know what? The "people are saying" thing is mine, okay? It's a signature phrase, and I'd like it if you stopped copying me.

DM @realDonaldTrump I'm not copying you, okay? More than one person can say "people are saying."

DM @youthcaptain Let me just tell you that it makes you appear weak. It makes you appear like a little person who copies a bigger person. Free advice is all I'm saying.

DM @realDonaldTrump I don't need your advice. When we meet in Singapore I will be commanding and in charge. Sad. You're a loser and a hater.

DM @youthcaptain See, there you go again. Copying me. Stop it. And if you're gonna do it, do it right. The "sad" part comes at the end of the tweet, like a little snap. You just don't get it. You need your own identity. Stop trying to be someone else. Sick.

DM @youthcaptain See? At the end of the sentence. It's what we call "the kicker."

DM @realDonaldTrump You know what's sad? When you see me and

Mayim Bialik out at the club doing the lambada, which for your information is known as the "Forbidden Dance."

DM @youthcaptain Hahahahaha-hahahahahahahahahahaha! Like, a million years ago! Like in the '90s! That was two wives ago for me! Wait. THREE wives ago! Man, get it together. In the first place, Mayim Bialik while a very talented comic actress is, like, forty? Old.

DM @realDonaldTrump You are trying to use your famous three-dimension chess on me. Mayim Bialik is the winsome and delightful star of TV's "Blossom," and I am at this moment trying to kidnap her and bring her to Pyongyang to be my bride.

DM @realDonaldTrump Don't spread that around. Guy code, okay?

DM @youthcaptain I cannot believe you are so wrong about everything. "Blossom" hasn't been on the air for many years. You're a nut job. Plus, aren't you already married?

DM @realDonaldTrump Look who's talking.

DM @youthcaptain Okay, I'll allow that.

DM @realDonaldTrump I'm sorry. I got off on the wrong foot. Can I tell you something? Everyone here is against the whole idea of our meetup. They think that I'm like some starry-eyed fanboy who just wants to be exactly like you.

DM @youthcaptain LOL! They're saying that about me, too!

DM @realDonaldTrump LOL

DM @youthcaptain LOL

DM @realDonaldTrump But the truth is, I'm bad with girls and my dad was never around and I see you flying around in that cool helicopter and with the blue suit and the hot ladies all around and I guess I want you to teach me things. I'll say it. I think of you like a dad. Maybe in Singapore you and I could just get together and chill.

DM @youthcaptain I admit I have a powerful animal magnetism.

DM @realDonaldTrump Totally.

DM @youthcaptain And you're right to admire me. People admire me. Everyone says that.

DM @realDonaldTrump I wish they said that about me.

DM @youthcaptain Don't sell yourself short. You want the respect and the ladies? You gotta act like they're yours. You want to wear the blue suit? Then wear it, know what I mean?

DM @realDonaldTrump I tried on a blue suit the other day. I looked like a giant blue pumpkin.

DM @youthcaptain You should meet my tailor. It's just a matter of letting it out along the lower torso.

DM @realDonaldTrump I'm hopeless. The only thing I've got going on is my hair.

DM @youthcaptain I agree. You've got great hair.

DM @realDonaldTrump Coming from you, that means a lot.

DM @youthcaptain You know what? Singapore is going to be a blast.

DM @realDonaldTrump Can I call you "Dad"?

DM @youthcaptain Whoa, whoa. Slow your roll there. I've already got two sons, okay?

DM @realDonaldTrump Three, you mean.

DM @youthcaptain What? Wait. What? Oh, right. Yes. I have three sons. And I've kind of got my hands full. Not looking for anything serious at this point.

DM @realDonaldTrump I get it. Really. I guess I'm just looking for someone to mentor me and help me be more chill and down with the ladies.

DM @youthcaptain That I can do.

Fair as Feck

As you probably know and wish you didn't, Samantha Bee is the host of a TBS show called "Full Frontal." As in "Nudity." *Honest! Shocking! The bluenoses will hate it!* You could say it was a show for people who live in an intellectual bubble, but bubbles are easily pierced; these days people live in a bathysphere, which is iron-clad and capable of descending to great depths at sea without imploding.

To remind her audience that they were good people and so that they could applaud her bravery, Bee called the president's daughter a "feckless c***." Others wondered whether the '60s project of language debasement had gone so far that someone could say anything without repercussions. I mean, really, was that nice?

What if Ivanka did, indeed, have feck to burn?

Wouldn't it be nice if the government had a special council that required *Full Frontal* to run a half-hour rebuttal about Ivanka's FQ, or Feck Quotient? Of course not. But that seems to be the opinion of Hollywood-type guy Seth McFarland, who jiggled his "sententious Twitter deep-thinker" toggle and wrote the following. "A simple means by which to begin the rehabilitation of a deeply fractured nation would be through the restoration of the Fairness Doctrine, which required all TV and radio broadcasters to present opposing viewpoints on all issues. Introduced in 1949, revoked in 1985. Bad move."

Perhaps he thinks the Fairness Doctrine required instant-response teams who'd barge into a studio when someone said something wrong and grab the mic. Imagine a fellow chatting on the air some Saturday morn:

"Well, friends, it's pretty simple—you just have to join the male and female, and—"

(Door bursts open; four members of the Fairness Enforcement Squad, dressed in red, appear; discordant trumpets blare.)

"You said 'male' and 'female' as a binary choice!" (Hissing from other three squad members.) "Recent scientific studies bolster the idea that gender is indeed a social construct, and the traditional male-female binary forces a stark, artificial bifurcation intended to keep women down!"

"Uh—this is a home-repair show? I was referring to the male/female parts of a hose connector. There aren't 57 types of hose connectors."

The Fairness Doctrine, in practice, meant lots of boring shows that took no controversial stances at all. *Coming up after the hour, we'll be talking to a man who bakes bread—in his bathtub! But first, here's our roving correspondent with a look at the soaring price of vacuum-cleaner bags.* There might be a station editorial that ran at 1 A.M. and came out strongly in favor of, say, sidewalks. There might be a counterpoint, if anyone heard or cared.

McFarland's tweet got lots of attaboys, but the fans were quick to note that not all viewpoints should be subject to counterpoints. Anti-vaxxers, flat-earthers, science deniers, traditional-marriage

supporters, people who don't endorse abortion up to the moment of baptism—these were settled issues, and let's not muddy the pristine waters of free thought by letting the crazies in.

The point of Fairness, after all, is a more just and equal world, and if you're against the orthodoxies that define Fair, the Fairness Doctrine wouldn't apply.

It wouldn't be fair if it did.

What's fascinating about the tweet is the idea that liberal voices somehow have no way to be heard amid the constant din of Fox. Don't you guys have, you know, everything else? CNN, MSNBC, *WaPo*, *NYT*, Hollywood, everything on TV except *Roseanne*—oh, right, never mind.

But to the Left, those aren't liberal. They're just reflections of common sense and truth. Everything outside the Left's bromides and shibboleths that leans to the right is craaaazy talk. Any ideas to the left of their own beliefs—*everyone should get a free house and a guaranteed income and a pony!*—is an "intriguing idea" that helps "redefine the notions of the possible" or some such warm mouthwash.

What's really striking about this call for a Fairness Doctrine is the disconnect between intention and result. Imagine this conversation:

So you want the government to monitor all speech and use the power of the state to require the expression of certain viewpoints and mandatory contradiction of ideas with which the government disagrees. Why, exactly?

"To prevent authoritarianism and fascism!"

Uh-huh. Makes sense. Any other reasons?

"To prevent the silencing of voices by corporate entities!"

Uh-huh. And you also support private companies such as Twitter and Facebook setting up content-monitoring groups with Jacobinical names like the "Truth and Safety Council," which mostly cancel Twitter accounts that say things like "Women don't have penises" on the grounds that it's hate speech? Isn't that corporate silencing?

"That's different. Hate speech has no protections."

Uh-huh. And you can't see a situation in which these tools would be used against you.

"No! If we like our First Amendment, we can keep our First Amendment."

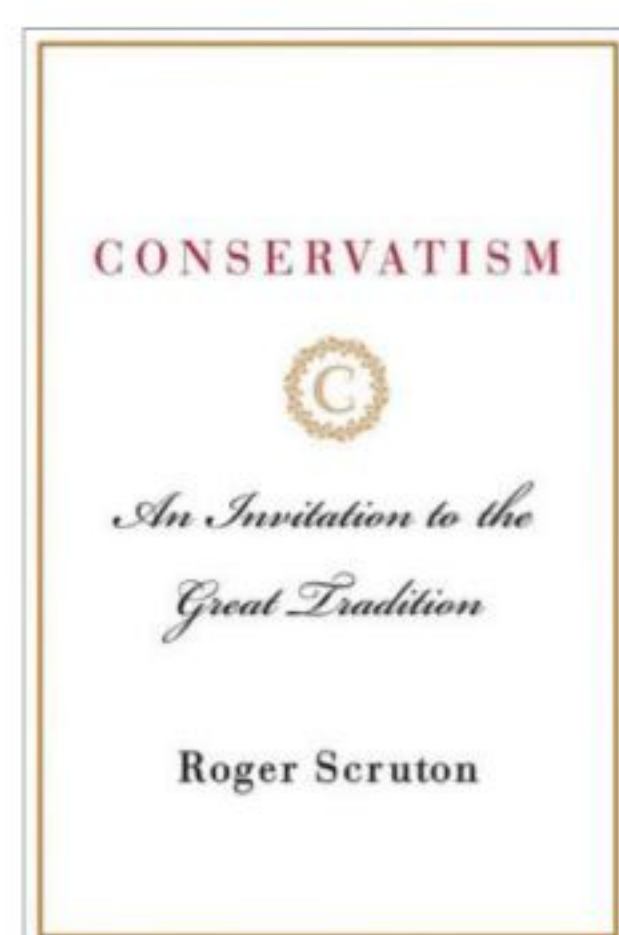
The Fairness Doctrine's return wouldn't be enough, of course; it would have to be applied to YouTube and Twitter and Facebook, so Wrong-Think could be hunted down no matter what hidey-hole it bolted into. C'mon, kids! There's someone who disagrees about the eventual impact of human-caused global temperatures. Get that feckless dolt!

As long as we're worried about unfairness and a "deeply fractured nation," shouldn't we do a study to see whether feck is equally distributed? If "feckless" means "weak and ineffective," then we should engineer a government program to re-feck the needy.

Thus enfeckened, perhaps they can make their points heard without demanding the government take the microphone away from someone else and give it to them. Sound fair? **NR**

Second-Person Politics

GERALD J. RUSSELLO



Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition,
by Roger Scruton (All Points,
176 pp., \$24.99)

FOR our intellectual and cultural elites, conservative ideas can never win. When the Cold War ended, conservatives got little credit; they supposedly had nothing left to fight against and now had to “invent” enemies, such as terrorism, to avoid their fall into irrelevance. When Barack Obama was president, conservatives were on the losing side of history, as the “arc” bent toward justice. Now with Trump, liberals are crowing again, about how his election shows that conservatism is incoherent and in disarray.

Roger Scruton will have none of this. As the preeminent exponent and defender of Anglo-American conservatism, he has spent his career explaining why conservative ideas endure. Author of books on topics ranging from fox-hunting to wine, Spinoza to sex, Scruton has perhaps done more to create the vision of a conservative way of life than any writer in English other than Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley Jr. As with those authors, reading Scruton is an aesthetic as well as an intellectual revelation; conservatism becomes much more than political positions or arguments to own the liberals, as fun as those are.

Mr. Russello, the editor of The University Bookman, is working on a book about conservatism.

Drawing on the work of David Hume, Michael Oakeshott, Pierre Manent, and Kirk, as well as lesser-known writers such as the Hungarian economist Peter Bauer, Scruton explicates the major lines of what he calls “philosophical” and “cultural” conservatism. Scruton argues that conservatism is about home, how we figure out what home is and how to create and sustain one.

Although the book is designed as an introductory text, even those who have followed Scruton will find it full of insight and a handy overview of the conservative tradition. Of particular note is how Scruton defends the relational aspect of conservative thought. Conservatism is not the unbounded “I” of the progressives (and some libertarians), but neither is it the undifferentiated mass of the socialist state. Rather, Scruton posits that the essence of conservatism is the I–thou, the “second person” perspective “in which the ‘we’ of social membership is balanced at every point against the ‘I’ of individual ambition.” This tension therefore allows for communication between people of differing views to whom we owe an obligation, which allows for society and political organizations. In contrast, to posit an endless array of fully autonomous individuals—as, for example, Rousseau did—is to render civil society impossible.

The problem with understanding conservatism is that it has two creation stories. Liberalism really has only one: The French Revolution combined a political ideology of overthrowing the old European order with the vision of a new man unencumbered by religion or tradition. Although this vision has antecedents in Western history, it was the French Revolution that cemented the “liberal person” for the next two centuries through today. Political conservatism, too, was born in the French Revolution’s aftermath, as a reaction to its excesses; we can see this birth most prominently in the work of Edmund Burke (who receives much attention in this volume).

Scruton recognizes that “we will understand modern conservatism as a political movement only if we see that some elements of liberal individualism have been programmed into it from the outset.” Political theorists, including Locke, and social and political movements have ren-

dered “reaction” obsolete; but that does not render conservatism itself unintelligible. That is because conservatism did not have only a political birth. Conservatism is older than the 1789 revolution, and built into the human condition. “Modern conservatism is a product of the Enlightenment. But it calls upon aspects of the human condition that can be witnessed in every civilization and at every period of history.” The most important is what can be called the physicality of conservative belief in the person. The person is not self-created and limitlessly changeable, subject only to the individual will. A conservative believes in contingency; individuals do have choice, but our identities are shaped by loyalties and communities not of our own choosing. Society must balance “the need for custom and community” with “the freedom of the individual.” Scruton sees that “extreme individualism” is a myth; it ignores “the indispensable part played by social membership in the exercise of free choice.”

This social membership is in part what we call tradition, which, echoing Oakeshott, Scruton defines as a kind of knowledge. Tradition helps us to know how to act in accord with our human needs and relational obligations. Political bonds among liberal individuals are weak, because there are no other bonds. For Scruton, this is a category mistake in understanding how political societies come into being and how they remain stable, even under great pressure. For the basic bond is pre-political. That is, legitimacy precedes consent, not the other way around. We recognize a political authority as ours, made by a particular people at a particular place for goals we share. This is why people continue to live peaceably in a society even when the vote might go against their wishes. The recent liberal mantra that Trump is “not my president” is therefore a breakdown of democratic order, not a sign of its health.

So when conservatives say they defend “freedom,” it is not some abstraction: “What they mean is *this* kind of freedom, the freedom enshrined in our legal and political inheritance, and in the free associations through which our societies renew their legacy of trust. So understood, freedom is the outcome of multiple agreements

over time, under an overarching rule of law.” How this happens, how a society maintains the balance between freedom and order, is conditioned by history, religion, custom, and tradition. Without these things the only option is some kind of reactionary authoritarianism, or its left-wing counterpart, political correctness. That is to say, the alternatives to conservatism replicate the very weaknesses liberals say they find in conservative thought.

Now one can already hear the liberal reaction: This view of political life is exclusionary, in that it deliberately cuts out of political society some who are not “like us.” Scruton disagrees. Where we live matters, and every modern society is in some sense a society of strangers. Therefore, we have to find common bonds upon which to build, and we must start with the ones right in front of us: our neighborhood and nation, and our rights as citizens of a particular polity to which we give our consent. This is not a racial or religious concept, as those are false bases on which to build a modern political society. Because conservatism incorporates a respect for the individual, it can accommodate both political freedom and societal coherence. “The language of politics is spoken in the first person plural.” We the People rule and should decide our own destiny.

In a concluding chapter, Scruton describes the current state of conservatism, which he places as a bulwark against both the “culture of repudiation” on the left and the rise of Islam within Europe. As a transnational “pre-political loyalty that is defined without reference to territory,” Islam threatens the European nation-state system in ways that echo international socialism. Western-style tolerance is no defense against such a challenge, because such tolerance assumes common goals. Conservatism has an initial organizational disadvantage because it is local, concerned with particular communities, and so sometimes cannot see a threat until it is almost too late. Here, Scruton argues that European Christian civilization gives us a resource to “find credible alternatives” to extremism, in the injunction to love one’s neighbor. The nation “is the means to reconcile people of different faiths and lifestyles.” For progressives or religious extremists, there is no such thing as a nation, no obligation to understand and defend your neighbors simply because they are your neighbors and not try to change them into socialist man or “woke” citizens. Neighborliness at its best means peace, and conservatism is a necessary strand of any political practice wishing to attain it.

NR

Pictures Of Hell

DAVID PRYCE-JONES



The Oxford Illustrated History of the Third Reich, edited by Robert Gellately (Oxford, 400 pp., \$39.95)

A FANTASY possessed Adolf Hitler that “race is everything, all the rest is chaff,” as he expressed it in *Mein Kampf*, his confessional book. In his mind, races were engaged in a Darwinian free-for-all struggle for supremacy, and this gave Germans every reason and right to dispose as they saw fit of the lands, properties, and, in the end, even the lives of other races. One source of his anger against Jews was their failure to fall in with his fantasy; their nonracial definition of themselves could not coincide with his. The outcome of his fantasy was world war, and by the time it ended he had wrecked the political and the moral order of Germany and every one of the countries of Europe that his armies had conquered.

All that is knowable about Hitler and the twelve years of his Third Reich is almost certainly already known. The documents in the archives have been examined and published, and the testimony of any Nazis or victims still alive, all of them by now in their 90s, is likely only to add more detail. Generally speaking, the more information that became available, the more monstrous Hitler was seen to have been, and the harder it was for Germans to understand what they had done or what was done in their name.

PROSPERO

in memory of Michael Potemra

His magic in the end meant only this
That he could wake up without bitterness

And walk beside the ever-phrasing sea
No longer sunken in his wizardry

No longer dwelling at his soul’s expense
The pauper of his mind’s magnificence

Nor hating with his energy for good
The Caliban imprisoned in his blood

By finding life was always suffering
And always would be despite anything

By finding that he had first to forgive
The past to find the mastery to live

And take the world not for a better place
But for a mirror for Miranda’s face

And no one there could ever know or tell
How much he had been slave to Ariel

—RICHARD O’CONNELL

Facts, even the most brutal, lend themselves to interpretation and special pleading. At first, *Wiedergutmachung*, or restitution, meant that Germans were saying sorry for the way they had carried out Hitler's bidding so willingly and left millions of corpses in their wake. Probably the most influential book published in the country since the end of the war is Günter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum*, which makes out that a magician, a sort of Pied Piper, has exercised his powers to cast a spell that transformed good people temporarily into bad. In which case, Germans aren't really and truly responsible for what they did, they couldn't have helped themselves; the sole guilty party is the magician. Bypassing the painful and shameful past altogether, successive German governments have promoted the new collective identity of Europe. As Egon Bahr, the éminence grise of German foreign policy, once said to me, "Membership of the European Union is how to make sure we don't go ape again."

A diehard old Nazi some years ago told me that I would live long enough to see statues of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels erected in the capital cities of

to a view of Israel widely held by Muslims. At political demonstrations they or their supporters are liable to be holding up placards with the slogans "Jews to the gas" and "Hitler was right." Iranian officials arrange regular conferences at which they and fanatics they have attracted from far and near utter threats of annihilation and genocide in the purest Hitlerite style.

The Oxford Illustrated History of the Third Reich is a collection of eleven essays written by academics, all but two of whom hold positions in English-language universities. The 150 or more photographs leave a slightly misleading impression that the book is intended to adorn coffee tables. Historiography is not a science: A. J. P. Taylor in Britain and Ernst Nolte and Klaus Hildebrand in Germany stand out among established historians for selecting facts purporting to show Hitler as a politician at the international level much like any other. The serious intention of these academics, however, is to scotch any idea of qualifying the harm Hitler did.

An autodidact at the mercy of prejudices that he could not even recognize, much less analyze, Hitler in normal circumstances would have passed

fight another world war made it easy for Hitler to out-maneuver him. He had seen the democratic politicians in action, Hitler told his aides, and they were worms.

The book has little or nothing to say about the crucial role of Goebbels, the man who mobilized the thugs to do Hitler's dirty work. On the left, the Social Democrats had so firmly rejected having anything to do with the Communists that coalition between them was excluded. Instead, Stalin ordered Ernst Thälmann, the leader of the Communist party in Germany, to campaign against the Social Democrats, absurdly labeling them "social fascists." This division was fatal. Stalin, Hitler's sometime rival and sometime partner, put the final seal on Hitler's victory, but this book has nothing to say about that either.

Hitler's transition from Chancellor to Führer was immediate, and still serves to illustrate the formation of a totalitarian nation. The simple mechanism of an Enabling Act turned Hitler's will into the law of the land. Within weeks, he was acting out his fantasy. Public and private associations, large and small, relevant and

An autodidact at the mercy of prejudices that he could not even recognize, much less analyze, Hitler in normal circumstances would have **passed through life leaving no trace.**

Europe. At the time, this seemed preposterous. Capital cities actually have put up Holocaust museums and memorials to the dead. A spectral Hitler nonetheless survives in the small but organized groups of obsessive men and women who perpetuate some version of racial fantasy, as often as not complete with a combative tattoo or a swastika armband on their uniforms. The market in Nazi memorabilia flourishes; a signed photograph of Hitler fetches up to 15,000 euros at auction, and a signed copy of *Mein Kampf*, \$20,000. Published in various editions in almost all Arab countries, Hitler's book is a runaway best-seller. Although long since exposed as an anti-Semitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is another best-seller because it presents Jews as engaged in worldwide conspiracy that corresponds

through life leaving no trace. A glimpse of Hitler was enough for Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen to pin him down exactly in his *Diary of a Man in Despair*, one of the classics of that whole period: "So sad, so insignificant among the masses, so profound a failure." What accounts for Hitler's rise from obscurity was an instinctive street fighter's sense of the strengths and weaknesses of others. German chancellor Heinrich Brüning, his successor Franz von Papen, and the aged President and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg were in a position to stop Hitler but failed to do so because they imagined they were playing him when he was playing them. Neville Chamberlain also should have been able to prevent Hitler from invading other countries, but his evident wish not to have to

irrelevant, were all placed under the control of the state. Organized by Goebbels, the ceremonial burning of books marked the end to freedom of expression. Jews were banned from the professions, and storm troopers boycotted shops owned by Jews. The concentration camps of Buchenwald and Dachau were already operating, holding some thousands of prisoners.

Daily life under Hitler is vividly portrayed. "Give me four years' time" was Hitler's way of saying that he would change the appearance of cities and the culture within them as befitted the German race. His taste in art, literature, and music was supposed to give the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or people's community, the due sense of themselves and of German racial superiority. Albert Speer, an architect by

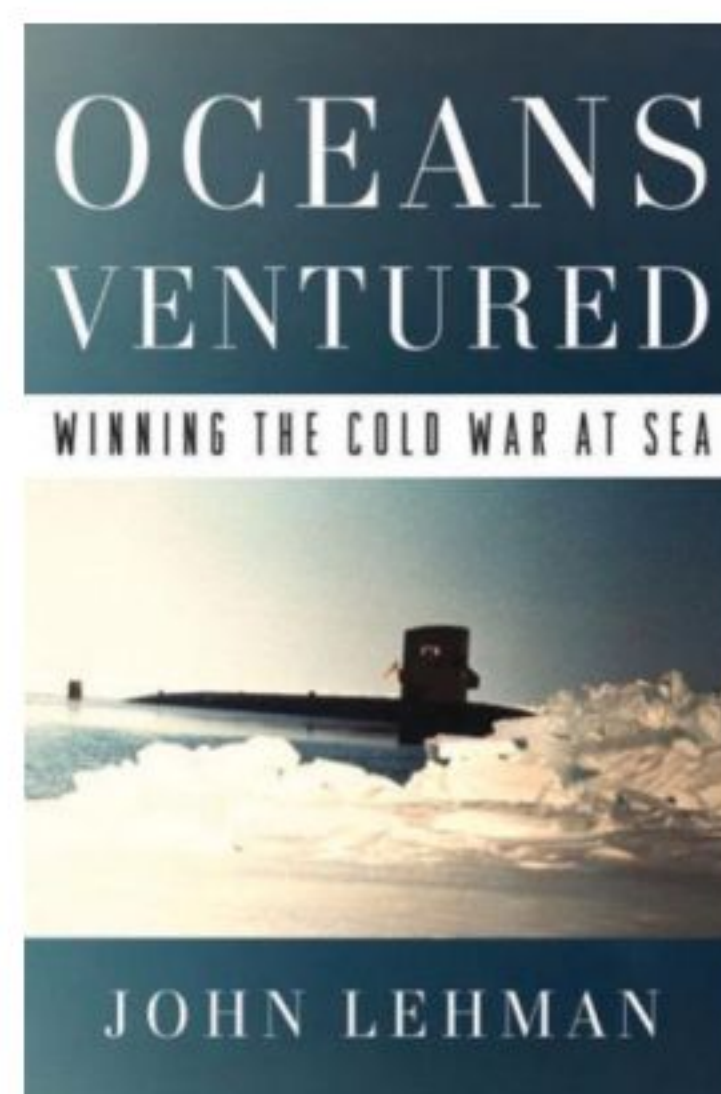
profession, built his career on models and designs grandiose enough to please Hitler. Constructed for the annual Party Day rallies, Speer's new stadium at Nuremburg could accommodate 200,000 all told, the awesome scale enhanced by experimental floodlighting and gigantic banners. The twin technological novelties of photography and film, it is argued, were exploited for the first time as useful tools of propaganda. The point is well made that the party stage-managed a variety of spectacles, festivities, and even elections in order to manipulate feelings of togetherness.

The Third Reich was totalitarian in spirit but not always in form. Ian Kershaw is the author of a definitive two-volume life of Hitler that emphasizes that those in positions to take decisions were expected to "work towards the Führer." Officeholders of any importance had responsibilities and powers defined so loosely that they overlapped with those of other officeholders. Administration at all levels was a matter of interpreting what might be in Hitler's head, and therefore a recipe for endless turf wars. Obedience had a component of fear. The Night of the Long Knives in June 1934 and the Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938 were warnings that Germans as well as Jews could be murdered in full view of the public and nobody would be held accountable. Atrocities were praiseworthy. Invading the Soviet Union and declaring war on the United States, Hitler at last began to misjudge relative strengths and weaknesses: Here were opponents who would stop him no matter how great the cost.

Toward the end of this book some grim photographs of burning villages, hanged partisans, piled corpses, and S.S. men happy to be deporting Jews testify to the reality that resulted from Hitler's fantasy. The essay about the Holocaust is somewhat theoretical and does not even attempt to discuss how it happened that so many ordinary men, and women too, all reasonably educated, were willing to take part in mass murder. A moral collapse so total has the power to put a question mark over the future of humanity. This book deals with it in the only possible way, doing its best to make sure that Hitler goes down in history as a monster. **NR**

The Necessary Navy

MACKUBIN THOMAS
OWENS



Oceans Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea,
by John Lehman (Norton, 368 pp.,
\$27.95)

SEVERAL years ago, when I was teaching at the Naval War College, I had occasion to write a case study on John Lehman for a seminar on strategic leadership. In this study, titled "John Lehman: Navy Secretary as Strategist," I concluded that he was one of the three most consequential secretaries of the Navy in American history, and certainly the most important one since the creation of the Department of Defense and the downgrading of the service secretaries from cabinet status after World War II.

I argued that since the unification of the U.S. military services under a secretary of defense in 1947, the selection of Lehman was unique in that he did not fit the mold of service secretaries, who for the most part have been chosen because of their financial contributions to presidential campaigns. On the contrary, Lehman, a protégé of Henry Kissinger and others, was a serious strategic thinker who played a major role in shaping the grand strategy of the Reagan

Mr. Owens, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia and the editor of its journal, Orbis, is the author of U.S. Civil-Military Relations After 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain.

administration. It was this strategy that helped bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union and end the Cold War.

A number of factors contributed to the Soviet Union's demise. Foremost among them was the decision to challenge the Soviets to an arms race, which the Soviet economy could not sustain. This economic strategy had several components. The first was a substantial increase in the U.S. defense budget that funded cutting-edge weapons. Second, and closely related, was a deliberate technological competition, including the development of stealth and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a space-based anti-ballistic-missile program, which threatened to render obsolete the Soviets' latest generation of ICBMs. The third was American support of the Afghan mujahideen, which helped sap Soviet morale.

The fourth was a series of U.S. military-service doctrinal changes that made it more likely that American forces could prevail in a conventional war with the USSR. The fact is that for many years, U.S. operational doctrine in the event of a war with the Soviet Union was a sham that ultimately depended on the American threat to use tactical nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet conventional attack against NATO. The credibility of that threat depended on the assumption that, in the face of Soviet conventional superiority, the United States possessed "escalation dominance," i.e., the ability to prevail in the event of a nuclear exchange, and that it could in turn prevent the Soviets from threatening a strategic nuclear strike in response to America's first use of tactical nukes. But the United States had lost escalation dominance by the mid 1970s. Soviet conventional superiority and the loss of U.S. escalation dominance meant that NATO was vulnerable to Soviet military threats.

The Army and the Air Force exploited emerging technologies and new operational concepts to develop a credible war-fighting doctrine in the event of a Warsaw Pact conventional attack. It involved the deep attack of Soviet follow-on forces and eventually became known as Air-Land Battle operations. The Navy did the same, employing studies and war games at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., to develop Sea Plan 2000, the genesis of what would become the U.S. Navy's maritime strategy.

The maritime strategy generated a great deal of controversy. It was opposed by analysts who focused on NATO's central front—they said it threatened to divert resources to what they considered a peripheral purpose. And it was opposed by those who felt that a naval strategy that threatened action against Soviet bastions on NATO's maritime northern flank and against Vladivostok in the Pacific was provocative and destabilizing. In fact, the maritime strategy proved to be a major contributor to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Oceans Ventured tells the story of “how a new president's determination to change the nation's course came together with a powerful strategy that could be implemented immediately through highly visible and dramatic operations,” Lehman writes.

While in itself the naval buildup and forward strategy did not end the Cold War, it did fundamentally change what the Soviets liked to call “the correlation of forces.” The realization by a new Soviet leadership that the global balance of power was rapidly shifting against them and that their failing economy prevented them from keeping up gave Reagan the leverage to negotiate the web of treaties and agreements that brought about the end of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

The title of the book is a play on “Ocean Venture '81,” the name of the definitive exercise intended to test and

Union was instrumental in bringing it to its knees.

To understand the importance of the maritime strategy and its execution, it is useful to remember the state of the United States Navy in the 1970s. The U.S. Navy reigned supreme at the end of World War II, but it was the victim of its own success. The navies of Japan and Germany lay at the bottom of the sea, and the newly created U.S. Air Force now challenged the U.S. Navy as the first line of defense in the emerging Cold War. The lack of a maritime adversary and the Cold War emphasis on nuclear weapons weakened the budgetary position of the Navy. The Vietnam War also consumed naval resources as the fleet aged.

Navy culture also changed. Its traditional offensive orientation declined, as did its emphasis on strategic thinking, weakening the strategist-operator cadre that had served it so well in World War II.

In 1970, the Soviets launched a massive naval exercise, Okean '70, which confirmed the view of American naval strategists that the USSR was determined to challenge U.S. maritime supremacy, just as American military planners were beginning to forgo the enormous strategic leverage of sea power. During the 1970s, NATO focused on the balance of NATO/Warsaw Pact ground forces, to the exclusion of all else. This was the situation that prevailed as Ronald Reagan became president and John Lehman became his secretary of the Navy.

Lehman was a tireless advocate of American naval power, and his arguments

aggressive naval officers under extremely difficult conditions, especially in northern waters. Lehman's account calls to mind the “Nelson touch,” the lasting influence of Lord Horatio Nelson on the Royal Navy during the Anglo–French wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Even after his death in 1805 at Trafalgar, captains of the Royal Navy continued to operate in accordance with Nelson's standing order: In the absence of signals and command, “no captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy.”

U.S. naval commanders during World War II were also noted for their aggressiveness. But this aggressive orientation declined in the 1970s. Lehman's selection of aggressive, offensively focused officers to implement the maritime strategy—“Ace” Lyons and others—suggests a “Lehman touch.”

Lehman leaves us with some thoughts about the future of U.S. naval power: “Our situation parallels that of the 1980s, and our adversaries are actively seeking to take advantage of our weakness. . . . The president's diplomatic power is diminished by a Navy that is stretched too thin and woefully underfunded.” Lehman calls for the Navy to revive awareness of the central importance of strategy and to reconstitute the naval “operator-strategist cadre that proved so vital in helping to win the Cold War at sea.”

The problem with assessing the impact of naval power is that it operates indirectly. Even a decisive naval battle does not immediately affect the outcome of a

John Lehman was a tireless advocate of American naval power, and his arguments persuaded President Reagan and his national-security advisers.

refine the maritime strategy. Executed by the Second Fleet/NATO Strike Fleet under the command of Vice Admiral James “Ace” Lyons, Ocean Venture '81 was the first of three large, imaginative, and, most significant, aggressive NATO naval exercises designed to bring the U.S. Navy into the icy bastions of the Norwegian Sea, which the Soviet navy believed to be sacrosanct. Lehman persuasively argues that the pressure that Ocean Venture '81 and subsequent exercises brought to bear on the Soviet

persuaded President Reagan and his national-security advisers. Lehman addressed the strategic and policy debates in his memoir, *Command of the Sea*. But developing a strategy is one thing; implementing it is another. *Oceans Ventured* focuses on the operational aspects of the maritime strategy, the way in which U.S. naval forces actually executed the strategy.

Lehman describes in some detail the operations that contributed to the ultimate success of the maritime strategy. These operations were executed by

war, as both Trafalgar and Midway prove. But naval power enables foreign policy. As the British naval historian Colin Gray once observed: If the United States wants to be a land power anywhere but North America, it must first be a sea power. And diplomacy flows from naval power as well. As Lehman remarks, “diplomacy is the shadow cast by military and naval power.” In *Oceans Ventured*, John Lehman makes a strong case for the role of naval power in winning the Cold War. **NR**

Film

Meager Competence

ROSS DOUTHAT

SOMETIMES you just have to stop watching. I figured that out after the first *Hobbit* movie. Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was a peak moviegoing experience—a childhood classic brought to life more beautifully than anyone could reasonably expect. But after Part One it was clear that the *Hobbit* movies were going to be bloated and disastrous; why give them the power to retrospectively taint Jackson's prior achievement? I didn't; I just stopped watching, without a trace of regret.

But I haven't ever managed that kind of self-discipline with Star Wars. The George Lucas prequels were terrible, a crime against the originals, but I still watched them all. Then came the Disney expansion, which promised to replace the ambitious dreadfulness of Lucas's prequels with something slick and mediocre. And exactly that has come to pass: We're four movies into the Disney era and they've given us one pretty good addition to the saga (*Rogue One*) and one interesting recurring character (Adam Driver's Kylo Ren); the rest of the new material is either disposable or (in the case of last autumn's *The Last Jedi*, especially) an active assault on the continuity and plausibility and mystery of the galaxy far, far away.

So to add up, that's seven new Star Wars movies and counting since 1999, with only one that's halfway worthy of the originals. Which suggests that maybe it's time for fans to find some self-discipline and just stop showing up.

Apparently a lot of people have finally found that self-discipline with *Solo*, the latest stand-alone installment from the Disney team, which appears to be bombing at the box office in a way that no Star Wars installment has before. In a way it's unfair for the Han Solo origin story to be the first to suffer this fate, since *Solo* is hardly aggressively offensive; indeed, it's better than it should be, given a troubled production history in which the co-directors had to be replaced by Ron Howard midway through, and

better in certain ways than the worst of the recent films.

It doesn't tediously remake an original, the way *The Force Awakens* did, and neither does it render all the original trilogy's drama moot, in the way of the idiotic political-military plotting in *The Last Jedi*. No Death Stars or Death Star knockoffs are blown up. The Force isn't even mentioned. You can feel Disney and its screenwriters groping for some kind of originality, some pathway out into a wider universe than the predictable one they've so far put onscreen.

But the movie still can't escape the sense of shrunkenness and repetition that now defines the Star Wars cosmos. We don't know much about Han's backstory in the original movies, but we hear enough to assume that it's interesting—he did the Kessel Run (whatever that is) in a famous way, he won the *Millennium Falcon* from Lando Calrissian, he picked up a Wookiee as his co-pilot somewhere, and he developed a hardened cynicism about galactic politics.

In the imagination those details can be fleshed out to fill a smuggler's lifetime, but in *Solo* they're all compressed into not only a single movie but a single heist-and-gangsters plot. In the space of what seems like a few weeks of galactic time, we watch the young Han (Alden Ehrenreich, not as bad as I feared) escape life as an imperial infantryman, meet Chewbacca, join a gang of smugglers (led by Woody Harrelson), meet Lando (an excellent Donald Glover), rob Kessel and escape, and win the *Falcon*. Each sequence is reasonably entertaining, but the effect is to make Han's past seem like a box-checking exercise—and worse, one that doesn't even produce the cynical character we know and love.

Instead, despite a lot of cynical brava-do, this movie's Han is just a good guy from start to finish—yet another up-from-nowhere hero, albeit from the alleys of a shipping hub this time instead of a desert planet, who's constantly making idealistic decisions and taking big risks for causes he admires and people he loves (notably a fellow street rat turned gang moll played by Emilia Clarke, a.k.a. Daenerys Targaryen).

I guess we're supposed to think that having some of those people and causes let him down will eventually turn him into the mercenary we meet in the Mos Eisley cantina; the movie does end with a stand-



Alden Ehrenreich and Joonas Suotamo in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*

off in which he plays to future-Han type and actually shoots first. But as John Podhoretz noted in his *Weekly Standard* review, “the Han we know and love from the original Star Wars movies is someone who sticks his neck out *for the first time* when he shows up in the last act to help blow up the Death Star and transforms his life as a result.” A movie that's nothing but young Han stealing from bad people for a good cause does not set up that future transformation; it just weakens it, and for no good reason except that the people making these movies don't know how to tell a story unless their hero is a rebellious outsider with a heart of gold.

The ultimate effect of this unoriginality (if I may unoriginally steal a point from the *Washington Post*'s Alyssa Rosenberg) is to make one almost appreciate the bloated Lucas prequels, which at least had gonzo tragic ambition alongside their utter narrative incompetence. *Solo*, despite its pre-production troubles, is nothing but competence: The action sequences work, the actors' dialogue is fine, the story moves along. But it has nothing new to offer, nothing to add to what we've seen before, and the fact that it's trying to be a little different only makes the sameness that much worse.

So maybe it's a natural place for audiences to finally jump ship, because in a way watching a flat-out failure isn't as depressing as the realization that this level of mediocrity might be as good as Star Wars gets.

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The Art of ‘Who Cares?’

OVER Memorial Day weekend, I embarked on a quest fit for only the most valiant of parents: A three-day out-of-town theme-park extravaganza. The destination was the Universal Orlando resort, a set of three adjacent parks featuring, among other things, the Incredible Hulk roller coaster. The Hulk is a gigantic green twisting machine that earnestly warns you about the dangers of gamma rays while you wait in line. Next, it launches you out of a giant tube to the sound of an enraged Hulk roar. Finally, it whips you along a track looping seven times at a top speed of 67 miles per hour.

“What are those giant nets doing below the ride?” my mom asked, skeptical, shielding her eyes from the sun, right before my son forced her to ride the Incredible Hulk. “Are those in case people fall out?”

Yikes! Here is the good news: Nobody fell out, and I suspect that the nets in question are for loose change, stray sunglasses, and rogue flying cell phones. Here is the bad news: After riding the glorious Hulk at least four times, and after taking the Jurassic Park river tour twice—complete with a life-like *T. rex*!—it was time to wander into other areas of Universal Studios Florida, where we had a decidedly less majestic experience. I’m speaking, of course, of the Simpsons Ride.

My kids clamored with almost rabid enthusiasm to experience the Simpsons Ride, which I thought was kind of weird until I figured out the reason: They’re not allowed to watch *The Simpsons*, as it is inappropriate for children and features occasional bad words. But it was raining, and the ride was indoors, and I figured there wouldn’t be any bad words—I was mostly right—and so on we went.

I won’t bore you with the details of the Simpsons Ride, in which you’re essentially stuck inside a nonsensical LSD-laced cartoon while strapped to what feels like a flying, non-cushy La-Z-Boy. Instead, I’ll stick with one simple highlight: the starring role of beloved *Simpsons* icon Krusty the Clown. As a character, Krusty, who hosts a dysfunctional children’s television program, is a “cynical, burnt-out, addiction-riddled smoker who is made miserable by show business but continues on anyway.” (That’s Wikipedia’s opinion, at least.)

To make a long story short, for all that the Simpsons Ride lacked in aesthetic value, it left us with one priceless gift: My entire family emerged from the ride shouting various lines in smoky, throaty Krusty the Clown voices. Our favorite, which we’re still occasionally yelling to this day, was a simple two-word refrain: “Who cares?”

In retrospect, I’m not even sure if “Who cares?” was an actual quote from the Simpsons Ride, but it certainly reflects the attraction’s ethos: Much of the ride’s storyline involves Krusty the Clown brushing off perfectly legitimate fears about amusement-park safety and an uncon-

trolled nuclear reactor. Regardless, here’s the point: It is strangely amusing, delightful, and liberating to yell “Who cares?” Try it, right now, in your own Krusty the Clown voice. Am I right? It feels amazing!

Our culture, it seems, could use a good, old-fashioned influx of “Who cares?”

I should clarify: I’m not encouraging apathy when it comes to important issues, nor do I support tuning out. One should never lose curiosity or industriousness when it comes to the wonders and problems and mysteries of the world. But you know the truth as well as I do: In today’s culture, we are engulfed in countless outrages and skirmishes and dustups that simply do not deserve our time. What they do deserve is a good, old-fashioned, full-throated, Krusty-voiced “Who cares?”

Let’s look at some recent headlines. “We Need to Talk about the Woke Droid” in the new Han Solo movie, explains an earnest piece at *Vox*. Over at the *Washington Post*, one writer worries about the quiet sexism wreaked by animals in children’s books: “Give me a female squirrel, a female duck, a female anything.” Google anything from “cultural appropriation” to “Elon Musk,” and heaven help you: A bundle of ginned-up controversies await. Most of them—with the exception of the eyebrow-raising news that Elon Musk might soon be selling actual flamethrowers in California, a state that puts warning labels on everything from coffee to cars—should earn the same Krustyesque response.

There are only a few short phrases in the English language that can completely short-circuit a conversation—and at first glance, the best of them are seemingly benign. “Good for you,” depending on the tone, can hijack a tale of good news. “Calm down” can instantly make a furious person approximately 1,000 times more furious. But really, can either of these rival “Who cares?” When uttered in the midst of sheer and utter nonsense, “Who cares?” can vaporize it all.

In the early 2000s, the office-supply chain Staples came up with the “Easy Button,” a circle of round red plastic you could punch to say, “That was easy!” A few years later, a skit starring comedian Dave Chappelle proposed the “Wrap It Up” box, which would play the increasingly loud orchestra music traditionally used to boot overly long-winded Oscar-acceptance-speech givers off the stage. But what about—and don’t steal this idea, since I think it could make millions—a “Who cares” button?

Think of the social-media implications! Are you faced with a fervent online controversy that shouldn’t even exist? Instead of a “like,” give a gentle “Who cares?” Moreover, the “Who cares?” button could feature a variety of iconic Hollywood voices: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sean Connery, Lauren Bacall, James Earl Jones, Judi Dench, Vincent Price, and Bobcat Goldthwait, all shouting in their own unforgettable ways. But we can’t forget Krusty the Clown, the cartoon who started it all, who would probably use this occasion to shout with all of his heart: “WHO CARES?!”

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Heather Wilhelm is a *NationalReview.com* columnist.

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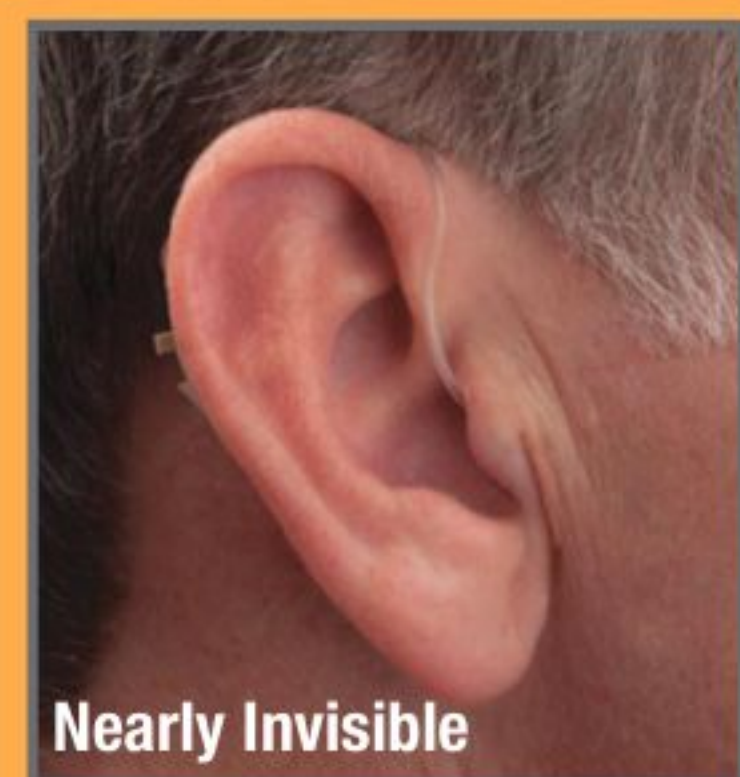
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